Working the Boundaries:

A Dialogical Narrative Analysis of

Social Work Practice Educators' Stories

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This work or any part thereof has not previously been presented in any form to the University or to any other body whether for the purposes of assessment, publication or for any other purpose. Save for any express acknowledgments, references and/or bibliographies cited in the work, I confirm that the intellectual content of the work is the result of my own efforts and of no other person.

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Abstract

Practice educators facilitate and assess the learning and professional development of social work students on placement. Ongoing political dispute about the nature and purpose of social work in England creates complexity that impacts on the perception and positioning of practice educators in social work education. This thesis explores practice educators' experiences with a view to gaining fresh insight into how they position themselves, and are positioned by others, in this landscape.

Within a qualitative, interpretivist narrative research design, practice educators' experiences were gathered in the form of stories during semi-structured conversational-interviews. The participants were chosen by purposeful sampling. Dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2010) was used to analyse and interpret the stories. Frank (2010) describes dialogical narrative analysis as a method of questioning. It is underpinned by the premises that people think *with* stories and not just *about* them (Frank 2010), and that they transmit their theories and explanations of experience through stories (Shay, 2006; 2008a).

New understandings of practice educators have been developed from the research, including fresh insight into their roles as facilitators and assessors of learning, and evaluators of learning experiences. Their role as boundary workers is also explored and a better understanding of the boundaried nature of the practice learning landscape in which they work has been developed. The capacity of practice educators to deploy relational agency in their role as

boundary workers is discussed, along with consideration of the ways in which practice educators' capacity for agency can be impeded by structural forces.

The implications of these new understandings have informed recommendations to enhance practice educators' recognition, to support their activity as a collective and develop their capacity to exercise their agency.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Practice educators facilitate and assess the learning and professional development of social work students on placements in practice settings. The aim of such placements is, "[to] prepare social work students for the realities of frontline practice" (Social Work Reform Board (SWRB), 2011, p.26). Achieving this aim is made problematic in England by ongoing political disputes about the nature and purpose of such practice, and whose "realities" are privileged in students' preparation (Higgins, Popple and Crichton, 2016; Bellinger, Ford and Moran, 2016). Contests about what social work is affect how people are helped to become social workers. This research explores the experiences of practice educators as they prepare students for social work practice. In this chapter, I introduce the research by briefly clarifying my use of terminology, considering three questions (Why this? Why now? Why me?), and setting out the structure of the thesis.

Terminology

The terminology of practice education changes as policy changes. Since the 1970s, practice educators have been referred to as student supervisors, practice teachers, practice assessors and, currently, practice educators. The practice educator standards extant at the time of this study (The College of Social Work (TCSW), 2013b) required practice educators to be registered social

workers with two years' qualified experience who had successfully undertaken courses leading to either Stage 1 or Stage 2 Practice Educator status. Stage 1 Practice Educators are eligible to work with first placement students, and Stage 2 Practice Educators with first and final placement students. Within this thesis I use the terminology as set out in the revised Practice Educator Professional Standards (British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2019).

Practice educators take overall responsibility for students' learning and assessment and make recommendations about their capability in practice.

Off-site practice educators are practice educators not located in placements alongside students. They work jointly with supervisors who are on-site with students.

On-site supervisors, (known as practice supervisors when I was conducting interviews for this research), are designated to manage students' day-to-day activity and make an important contribution to their learning and assessment. It is good practice for off-site practice educators, on-site supervisors and students to hold tri-partite meetings to discuss placement arrangements and students' progress.

Tutors are university employees assigned to students to support their placements. Some universities employ independent practice educators to fulfil

this role; others appoint in-post lecturers. Universities may operate both personal tutor and placement tutor systems, but ‘tutor’ in this study refers to those supporting students’ placements.

Placement is time spent by a student in a practice setting learning to become a social worker. Practice educators in this study worked in 70-day first placements and 100-day final placements. Placements are temporally structured through a framework of meetings designed to support students’ progression and to facilitate communication between parties. Although variable across universities, these generally include practice learning agreement meetings, midpoint reviews, supervision, tri-partite meetings (where applicable), and resolution meetings if difficulties arise. Placements are audited for their suitability by placement coordinators.

Placement coordinators are those who find, audit and quality assure workplaces as suitable sites for social work students’ practice learning in accordance with regulatory requirements for social work education and training.

Why this?

The ‘this’ of my research is practice educators’ perceptions of and positioning in social work practice education in England.

Practice education is an integral part of social work education. Although there are significant debates about the relationship between classroom-based and practice-based education for social work (Nixon and Murr, 2006; Higgins and Goodyer, 2015), the importance of the practicum has been promoted since the introduction of the social work degree (Department of Health (DH), 2002; Flanagan and Wilson, 2018), and is debated as pedagogy in its own right (Wayne, Bogo and Raskin, 2010; Larrison and Korr, 2013; Higgins, 2014). There is a growing picture from research about different aspects of practice education; for example, the political context and the experience of change (Bellinger, 2010b; Bellinger and Ford, 2016; Burton, 2018; Bertotti, 2019), types of placements and relations within them (Henderson, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Jasper *et al.*, 2013; Domakin, 2015), and disrupted placements and failing students (Parker, 2010; Finch, 2010; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013). Additionally, research has addressed the importance of supervision and good practice learning environments (Lefevre, 2005; 2016; Davys and Beddoe, 2000; 2009; Brodie and Williams, 2013), the assessment of practice (Stone, 2016; 2018) and the use of social work methods as methods of social work education (Wheeler and Greaves, 2005; Gibson, 2012; Couchman, Letchfield-Hafford and Leonard, 2013).

When I first entered this doctoral degree course, I had thought my research topic would be practice educators' orientations to practice assessment. However, in my pilot study, the three participants spoke of facilitating and assessing learning as seamlessly interwoven practices, and only separated out assessment when talking about marginal or failing students. Furthermore, my

reading of the literature was suggesting that the role of practice educators in educating students was being given insufficient attention (Jasper, 2014; Domakin, 2014; Woods, 2015). The pilot study, my reading and a growing awareness of research already under way in practice assessment, prompted me to change the focus of my study. I decided to widen the scope of my study to see what experiences practice educators would talk about, given an open invitation, and to explore what this revealed about their perceptions of and positioning in social work education. The questions I have posed for this exploration are:

1. What do practice educators' stories tell us about who practice educators are?
2. How do practice educators hold their own in their stories, and against whom are they holding their own? (By 'holding their own' I mean seeking to sustain their value, as individuals or a collective, in response to what threatens their worth.)
3. What is at stake in their stories? (By which I mean, that which is at risk or in jeopardy in their stories.)

In the methodology chapter I set out Frank's (2010) narrative approach from which these questions are derived.

Why now?

The ‘now’ of my research spans a four year period, 2016-2020. It is the now of the present continuous, carrying with it change that has been continuously present for two decades (Wiles, 2017; Burton, 2018) creating an “inconstant socio-economic-political arena” (Plenty and Gower, 2013, p50). A brief historical overview is necessary to contextualize the project, although this history is not its focus.

The social work degree was introduced in 2002 with the intentions of raising the quality and effectiveness of social work and recruiting more social workers (DH, 2002; Higgins, 2015). It initially evaluated well (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008), but investigations into the death of Peter Connelly, along with employers’ concern that newly qualified social workers were not fit for purpose, brought attention to bear on social work education (Haringey Local Safeguarding Board, 2009; Laming, 2009; Simpson and Murr, 2014; Higgins and Goodyer, 2015). A Social Work Task Force (SWTF) was established to review social work and social work education (SWTF, 2009b), and the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) was established to implement its recommended reforms (SWRB, 2010). A reformed social work degree, fully implemented in 2013, made significant changes. Placement criteria required that students be prepared for statutory aspects of social work; indicative curriculum content was published within curriculum frameworks; and holistic assessment of professional capability replaced the competency

framework of occupational standards. At the time, I considered that the reformed degree offered hope of change for the better (Simpson and Murr, 2014). However, before the first academic year of the reformed degree was completed, further reviews of social work education in England were commissioned by the Department of Health and the Department for Education which destabilized the reforms (Wiles, 2017). Subsequent arguments have suggested that the reforms were only ever a superficial rebranding exercise (Higgins, Popple and Crichton, 2016). The professional body, The College of Social Work (TCSW), has come and gone since the reforms, and the regulator, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), was replaced in 2019 by Social Work England (SWE).

Existing research has explored the impact of specific aspects of change on practice educators and their practices (Stone, 2014b; Jasper and Field, 2016; Wiles, 2017; Burton, 2018). Cross (2016, p.29) described the uncertainty and unpredictability brought by rapid, perpetual change as the “shifting sands” of practice educators’ experience. My research was undertaken with a view to seeking insight into their positioning and their thriving and/or surviving in the now of this fast moving landscape.

Why me?

I qualified as a social worker in 1990. I acted as an on-site supervisor in 1994 and became a practice teacher in 1996. I took up a post as Co-ordinator of the

Practice Teacher Award at Wolverhampton University in 2001, and have remained responsible for the education and training of practice educators there since. I also lead students' placement modules. I am interested in and passionate about social work practice education. I have written about what it means to learn in, for and from practice (Nixon and Murr, 2006), what supports practice educators (Waterhouse, McLagan and Murr, 2011), the competency framework of assessment (Simpson and Murr, 2012/13), and the dialectics of social work education (Simpson and Murr, 2014). In this latter article, my colleague and I argued that movements of thought from thesis and antithesis never resolve into synthesis in social work education. Surface tensions may temporally resolve, but conflicts of interest between stakeholders at a deeper level sustain resistance to synthesis.

My embeddedness in the subject matter means I bring my existing knowledge, understanding and experience to the research as an asset rather than a problem (Shaw and Gould, 2001; Radnor, 2002). I recognise that my interpretation of practice educators' storied experience is influenced by my experience, and I understand that declaring this does not alter that influence. Who I am affects what I hear, how I hear it and what sense I make of it, irrespective of whether or not I recognise this. This impacts on the claims I make for my research, which not only need to be credible but also modest (Connor, 2013).

The recognition that my embeddedness in the subject matter influences my research does not mean that the influence is unalterably deterministic. To foster interpretive openness, I have adopted a reflexive approach in which I interrogate my interpretation in order to understand experiences from other points of view and from value positions other than my own (Fook, 2001; Radnor, 2002; Connor, 2013). For Frank (2010), it is advantageous that narrative analysts are aware of the stories in circulation. I will return to explain this statement further in the methodology chapter, but to conclude this section, I re-state that my position as a researcher in this field is strengthened by my knowledge of it. Nonetheless, with Fook (2001), I acknowledge that, even deploying methods to promote interpretative openness, it is impossible to avoid making implicit judgements at times about the apparent standpoints of participants.

Thesis structure

The structure of this thesis follows a conventional pattern.

Chapter one: Introduction – clarifies terminology, sets the context of the research and states the thesis structure.

Chapter two: Literature Review – gives an overview of existing knowledge and debate in the aspects of practice education most pertinent to this study. After

setting the parameters of the review, the content is structured by following an ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, in Musson, 2017, p.58). It begins by looking at the micro-system of relations within placements, then considers the meso-system of the university and social welfare/work agency in which placements are embedded, and then explores the macro system of national stakeholders influencing the political context in which practice educators work. This structure has been chosen because it addresses dimensions of complexity (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015b; Cashman *et al*., 2015) important to the research.

Chapter three: Methodology – states my position as the researcher in this study and justifies the fit between the research objective, design, methods and implementation. The chapter explains and explores dialogical narrative analysis as my chosen mode of inquiry.

Chapter four: Re/Presenting Stories – offers my re-telling of the stories selected as the basis for this thesis. These are presented in three themes:

1. Stories of commonality that confirm and mutually reinforce each other (collective narratives)
2. Stories of contradiction and rivalry between practice educators
3. Stories of contention between practice educators and others

Chapter five: Discussion – explores how the stories address the research questions. My discussion argues that the stories contribute to understandings of practice educators as *educators,* facilitating, assessing and evaluating learning and learning experiences; and of practice educators as boundary workers (research question 1). It examines the knowledge, skills and strategies of boundary working used by practice educators to hold their own in a placement nexus (research question 2). Finally, it identifies the promotion of practice educators' relational agency amidst the constraints of structural forces as significant in the protection of what is at stake in their stories (research question 3).

Chapter six: Conclusion and Recommendations – gives an overview of the study, states its contribution to knowledge, considers its limitations and applications, and makes recommendations for practice and further study.

Chapter Two: A Literature Review

The aim of my research is to explore practice educators' experiences of being practice educators. Given the potential breadth of this topic, I scoped a wide range of literature for this review. I began reading before holding any interview-conversations and continued throughout the research, as new ideas were introduced by participants' stories and my analysis of them. For my initial scoping, I used key word searches in the University's search engine Summon, the database SOCINDEX, and the British Library's Electronic Theses Online Service. I also chose three journals highly likely to yield good returns: the British Journal of Social Work, Social Work Education and the Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning. Word search terms included, in various Boolean combinations, the following: practice educators, practice learning, practice assessment, social work placements, social work education, practice education, social work and supervision. I read key social work education text books, and identified further reading from the reference lists of articles, books, theses, and practice educator candidates' assignments.

I used some inclusion and exclusion criteria in making judgements about the parameters of the review. I set 2002, the year the social work degree was introduced, as the start date for literature searches of academic texts, although literature pre-dating 2002 that continues to make a contribution through citations has been included. I excluded interprofessional practice education literature, except where it has been influential within social work education. I have

included international and intra-national literature that contributes to an understanding of the experience of practice educators in England. Generally, I have focussed on literature that has been peer reviewed. However, occasional reference has been made to a trade journal (Community Care) and to policy drivers within grey literature where these have contributed to debate about social work practice education.

My editorial task for this chapter has been to choose for inclusion literature that informs understanding and interpretation of the stories told by the participants. One way in which I made sense of my task was to think of the literature as 'stories already told', and to choose from among them those relating to participants' stories. Therefore, I have included literature addressing practice educators' direct experiences of their work with students, on-site supervisors, tutors and managers, the complexity of their role and the emotional cost of their work. I have also included literature debating relations between social work practice and social work education, and the influence of stakeholders in the landscape of practice education. Excluding literature has been almost painful at times, as I realised that topics of interest to me were not of particular significance in participants' stories. Excluded topics include the shift from assessment of competence to assessment of capability, theoretical debate about subjectivity and objectivity in assessment, extensive consideration of work-based learning theories and interprofessional approaches to practice-based education, and the socio-economic context of social work education. These areas of interest did not pass the audition. In contrast, during the analysis of participants' stories, some topics, such as boundaries and boundary

working, arrived late and stole the show by becoming a central argument in the thesis. To preserve the chronological distinction between literature reviewed before and after analysis, I have presented the latter as a coda.

The structure of this chapter moves through different levels of scale in practice education. This structure introduces one of the key themes of this thesis: that practice educators work in a complex landscape (Plenty and Gower, 2013; Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015a). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015b, pp.100-101) describe complex landscapes as those within which there are multiple stakeholders engaging in overlapping and competing practices, pursuing different interests along diverse trajectories, and exercising different kinds of power, across a range of scales, to fulfil different purposes. They identify five factors that they argue create complexity: [1] the involvement of multiple institutions, [2] contrasting and competing practices, [3] constant change, [4] diverse powers, and [5] multiple levels of scale. These factors permeate practice education from the macro scale of governance to a micro scale of practice educators' everyday experiences. The literature review begins at a micro level by considering practice educators' work with others in the placement. It then moves to the meso level to address debate about practices and relations between universities and practice placement agencies (social work education and social work practice). Finally, at the macro level, literature appraising the influence of national stakeholders is discussed.

Micro: Practice educators' working relations and practices in placements

Practice educators and their work with students

Relationships between practice educators and students are considered important for positive placement experiences (Lefevre, 2005; Parker, 2006; Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Parker, 2010; Flanagan and Wilson, 2018). Both the ethical qualities (honesty, integrity, openness) and the behaviours of practice educators contribute to the way students perceive them (Lefevre, 2005; Parker, 2006). Positive perceptions of practice educators correlate with students' satisfaction with their placement (Parker, 2010; Flanagan and Wilson, 2018), though caveats are given that satisfaction should not be regarded as a proxy for effectiveness (Fortune, McCarthy and Abramson, 2001; Parker, 2006).

Being supportive is a key quality in practice educators with whom students are satisfied (Lefevre, 2005; King *et al.*, 2009). It is linked to their perception of how available to them their practice educators are (Lefevre, 2005; Flanagan and Wilson, 2018). Being supportive also carries an expectation of being nurturing, by showing warmth, taking an interest in student wellbeing, (not just professional development), and sheltering students from unnecessary stresses and strains (Lefevre, 2005; Parker, 2006; King *et al.*, 2009).

Both students and practice educators identify ethical qualities as important in their relationship with each other, as well as being important qualities in practice educators. These qualities include practice educators' capacities to respect, listen to and empathise with students (Lefevre, 2005; King *et al.*, 2009; Parker, 2010; Brodie and Williams, 2013), to trust students and be trustworthy themselves (Wheeler and Greaves, 2005; Lefevre, 2005, King *et al.*, 2009, Vassos, Harms and Rose, 2018), to reveal their own vulnerability to students (Bogo, Globerman and Sussman, 2004; King *et al.*, 2009), and to be honest (King *et al.*, 2009; Brodie and Williams, 2013), though Brodie and Williams (2013) observed that honesty for students meant honesty about their progress, while for practice educators, it meant being honest about the realities of social work.

These affective and ethical qualities are important because they mediate the way practice educators work with students and influence students' appreciation of their expertise as educators. For example, critical feedback on practice and developmental progress is better received from practice educators who have formed open and trusting relationships, and who can provide it in ways that encourage, rather than thwart, self-belief. (Fortune, McCarthy and Abramson, 2001; Bogo, Globerman and Sussman, 2004; Lefevre, 2005; Parker, 2006; Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Brodie and Williams, 2013; Cleak, Roulston and Vreugdenhil, 2016).

Much of the literature on the educative activities of practice educators focuses on what happens in supervision. Supervision is a key site for learning on placements (Brodie and Williams, 2013; Field, Jasper and Littler, 2016), and is described by Beverley and Worsley (2007) as “the beating heart” of a practice placement where experiences are “distilled, mulled over and savoured for their learning” (p.83). The practice educators’ supervision activities appreciated by students include helping them to connect theory and practice, conceptualize and reflect on practice, and give examples from their own practice (Brodie and Williams, 2013; Jasper and Field, 2016; Cleak, Roulston and Vreugdenhil, 2016; Flanagan and Wilson, 2018); providing a safe space to talk about mistakes (Lefevre, 2005); keeping them on track with the placement portfolio (Brodie and Williams, 2013); and good management of caseload allocation (McNay, Clarke and Lovelock, 2009; Brodie and Williams, 2013; Flanagan and Wilson, 2018).

Students’ perceptions of on- and off-site practice educators are mixed. Some find it beneficial to work with two different people because of the different perspectives on practice it brings. Others describe the relationship between their off-site practice educator and on-site supervisor as collusive, because they uncritically accept each other’s views without listening to students (Parker, 2010; Flanagan and Wilson, 2018). Also of interest is Neal’s and Regan’s (2016) finding that students felt less able to question on-site supervisors’ and [on-site] practice educators’ feedback for fear of jeopardising the ongoing relationship with them through the placement. Underpinning these fears are students’ concerns about practice educators’ use or misuse of power. Tew

(2011) argues that collusion, exclusion and oppression result from the deployment of limiting modes of power, whereas deploying productive modes of power promotes cooperation and mutual challenge, and enhances opportunities.

Discussion of power relations in placements feature throughout the literature. Parker (2010), drawing on a typology devised by French and Raven (1960, in Parker, 2010, p.995), explores the different kinds of social power at play in relations between practice educators and students.

- *reward power:* the capacity to offer incentive or benefits
- *coercive power:* the capacity to threaten or bring negative consequences
- *legitimate or position power:* the authority derived from role, status, function or seniority
- *expert power:* the ability to use knowledge, wisdom and experience
- *referent power:* being respected or admired

Parker (2010) found that students understood the legitimacy of the social power invested in practice educators, but were concerned about the mis-use of reward power, expressed as the allocation of work or resources, and coercive power, expressed as setting the terms for students' behaviour and action on placement. Much of the literature states that students value practice educators who manage these power relations well (Cowburn, Nelson and Williams, 2000; Lefevre, 2005; King *et al.*, 2009; Parker, 2010; Burton, 2018). However,

Cowburn, Nelson and Williams (2000) argue that the subordinate position of students leaves them vulnerable to oppressive practices, but that honest, open relationships and transparent practice (also advocated by Stone, 2018), minimize the potential for oppression. Students' concern about practice educators' power over them can cause them to hesitate in calling in a tutor when there are difficulties, for fear of it jeopardizing relations with their practice educator (Flanagan and Wilson, 2018). King *et al.* (2009) recognise that power imbalances cannot be avoided and that the emphasis should be on bringing people together in mutually beneficial relations. Practice educators recognise socially structured power differences between themselves and students. Brodie and Williams (2013) quote a participant: "It is important to manage differences between you and the student, not just obvious ones like gender, but manage power difference and different world views" (p.512). Parker (2010) states that honest, humanizing relationships between practice educators and students are essential, that obstacles to power sharing between them need to be identified, and that it is important to develop environments in which they can work collectively to resolve placement issues. For Tew (2011, p.50) this needs those with legitimate power not only to deploy their power over others productively but also find creative and imaginative ways to generate power together.

The above addresses perceptions of what is good or problematic in practice educators derived mostly from studies involving students, but confirmed in studies of practice educators' views. In terms of their views of students, practice educators are concerned by those who do not take learning seriously (King *et al.,* 2009), who are passive rather than active in the placement, and who lack

resilience in coping with the social work environment (Stone, 2016). Stone (2016) refers to practice educators who found that students lacking resilience became like service users. Lefevre (2005) observed that practice educators' capacity as social workers to support and nurture service users was not indicative of their willingness to support to students, whose vulnerability could be perceived as needy, and as evidence of unsuitability for social work. Practice educators are required to adopt a balanced position which is neither overly therapeutic nor entirely managerialist, but which meets students' personal and organizations' structural needs (Lefevre, 2005; 2016).

Practice educators and the emotional cost of their work with students

In addition to the importance of the quality of relationships with students, the literature reveals the emotional cost of being a practice educator. Practice educators willing to learn from students and working with motivated students making the most of their placement, express gratification and satisfaction when a placement ends (Develin and Matthews, 2008; Baum, 2007). They also express sadness because a relationship in which they have invested has ended, and relief because their time-consuming work with the student is over (Baum, 2007).

Students who are struggling or failing evoke a wide range of strong feelings for practice educators (Finch, Schaub and Dalrymple, 2014). The psychological and emotional impact of failing a student in practice is widely reported in the literature across a range of professions (Duffy, 2003, 2013; Tillema, Smith and

Leshem, 2011; Finch and Taylor, 2013). Practice educators generally want positive and affirming relationships with students (Lefevre, 2005; Develin and Matthews, 2008), but with failing students, the relationship can become fractious and frayed as corrective feedback is given, anxieties are heightened and the satisfaction practice educators derive from what they give back to their profession (generativity) is eroded by their responsibility to be a gatekeeper for their profession (Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Develin and Matthews, 2008; Finch and Taylor, 2013). A range of practice educators' negative experiences is reported in the literature. These include psychological experiences such as anxiety due to a concern that their professional judgement will be called into account (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010); anxiety from the feeling that they, as much as students, are under scrutiny (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2012/13); and stress and isolation due to the amount of extra work generated by supervising a failing student without workload relief (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011). Negative emotional responses are also reported, including fear, anger and irritation (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Finch and Taylor, 2013); guilt and blame (Brandon and Davies, 1979; Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013).

An influential factor in how well practice educators cope with the experience of a marginal or failing student is whether or not they feel supported, either by colleagues and managers who understand their need to keep supporting the student throughout the placement, or by university staff (Matthews *et al.*, 2009; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010). Working with failing students, and managing the required assessment processes for failing a student, are time-consuming, and

impact on the workplace as a whole, not simply the practice educator (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011). A lack of resources often restricts placement agencies from being able to offer workload relief to practice educators (Shapton, 2006/07), despite payment of daily placement fees (Moriarty *et al.,* 2010). Confidence in their own practice educator role, the strength they draw from their own social work professionalism, peer support, and support from the University, can contribute to practice educators' capacity to cope (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Waterhouse, McLagan and Murr, 2011; Burton, 2018).

A phenomenon that has attracted the phrase 'failing to fail' has become associated with practice educators' responses to working with failing or marginal students (Duffy, 2003; 2016; Shapton, 2006/07; Finch and Taylor, 2013). A perception of low failure rates in placements across a range of professional qualifying courses is a mainstay of debate in the assessment of professional practice. Numerous reasons for the perceived low failure rate are debated in the literature, including the lack of support from the workplace and University for practice educators to fail students (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Moriarty *et al.,* 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Waterhouse, McLagan and Murr, 2011). However, many of the reasons relate to practice educators themselves. These include practice educators' inability to assess students properly, either because they are inexperienced, or because they do not understand universities' assessment practices and regulations (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Shapton, 2006/07; Knight and Page, 2007). A perception that practice educators experience a conflict of values between their educator-

enabler and educator-examiner roles is also cited among reasons for low failure rate, along with reports that they find their responsibilities to their employers and to the university incompatible (Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Moriarty *et al.,* 2010; Rawles, 2012/13; Finch and Taylor, 2013). The challenging emotional and psychological context of failing students is considered to contribute to 'failing to fail' too (Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013; Finch, Schaub and Dalrymple, 2014). Finally, attention is drawn in the literature to practice educators' tendency to be generous in their assessment, especially where students have experienced personal problems; and to be overly optimistic of students' future ability, giving them the benefit of the doubt, especially after a first placement (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Rawles, 2012/13). Schaub and Dalrymple (2011) distinguished optimistic assessments from those based on "impression retention" in which practice educators did not adjust initial favourable assessment. In an interprofessional report, Yorke (2005) proposed that 'failing to fail' could occur because practice educators want to avoid the hassle of failing students.

The 'failing to fail' phrase has created a narrative interpretation of research evidence and academic debate about perceived low failure rates. An ethical difficulty of arguing that practice educators fail to fail students is the moral indictment of practice educators' integrity (Appleton and Adamson, 2016). Finch (2010) identified the balancing characteristics of practice educators who cope better than others when failing students. She described them as more likely to be experienced and knowledgeable in formal assessment processes, more able

to separate out their examiner role, and more able to distance themselves from the emotional impact. Finch (2015b) questions the validity of ‘failure to fail’ as the summative interpretation of the evidence, which, being derived from small scale qualitative research, she proposes is not designed for extensive generalizability. She argues that other potentially influential factors (for example, admissions processes) remain under-researched, and that research has been too focussed on individual practice educators, at the expense of gaining an overview of assessment procedures, including practice assessment panels and external examination.

Nonetheless, the literature does support Finch’s (2010; 2017) assertion that practice educators find failing students difficult. Shapton (2006/07), in an article urging caution against using research to apportion blame, argues that practice assessment is more difficult than academic assessment, because it focuses on behaviour and attitudes as much as knowledge and skills. He also argues that it is made more difficult by varying interpretations of different requirements by different stakeholders. In this, he proposes that, rather than practice educators being incompetent in their understanding of differing assessment regulations, it is the multiplicity of such regulations that renders them incomprehensible. I return to this later when discussing macro scale influences.

Practice educators (off-site) and their work with on-site *supervisors*

The views of on- and off-site practice educators are rarely differentiated, but the off-site model has a different dynamic because of the inclusion of an on-site supervisor working alongside the student in the placement.

Both off-site practice educators and on-site supervisors believe that off-site practice educators should have good knowledge of the work of the placement agency, and the service user group served (Henderson, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Wiles, 2017). This is essential in order for on-site supervisors to find them credible as *practice* educators; their expertise as educators is insufficient without this credibility (Henderson, 2010; Fenton-O'Creevy *et al.*, 2015a). Practice educators recognize that without such knowledge practice becomes decontextualized in supervision, and reflection is isolated from the context that enriches it (Zuchowski, 2016; Wiles, 2017).

On-site supervisors value practice educators who work in partnership with them and meet with them regularly, and they value the support that such practice educators give them (Henderson, 2010; Waterhouse, McLagan and Murr, 2011). They also value their own contribution to students' learning and believe students benefit from having two people supporting them (Henderson, 2010). They believe they make a significant contribution to practice educators' assessment of students, which is insufficiently valued, and they lament the privileging of practice educators' judgements (Henderson, 2010). Nonetheless,

on-site supervisors who are not social workers are concerned about their lack of understanding of assessment processes (Henderson, 2010).

For their part, practice educators recognize their reliance on on-site supervisors to allocate students appropriate work and to contribute to students' assessment, although they express difficulties with the latter when the on-site supervisor is not a social worker (Henderson, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Zuchowski, 2016; Bates, 2018). They believe that unqualified on-site supervisors should be more supported by university staff, rather than by them, to understand their role, and that placement agencies should give on-site supervisors more time to support students and provide the necessary learning opportunities (Henderson, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Zuchowski, 2016). Both practice educators and on-site supervisors lament the lack of training for becoming on-site supervisors, and lack of preparation for them prior to providing placements (Henderson, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Jasper *et al.*, 2013; Zuchowski, 2016; Bates, 2018).

Practice educators and their working relations with tutors and placement coordinators

Practice educators find support workshops offered by tutors helpful, but outside of scheduled, planned support, satisfaction with tutors is low (Waterhouse, McLagan and Murr, 2011; Plenty and Gower, 2013; Higgins, 2014). Practice educators are concerned that tutors are not proactive in calling meetings when

difficulties become apparent in placements (Parker, 2010), compounding students' hesitancy to call their tutor in times of difficulty (Flanagan and Wilson, 2018). It is tutors' expertise that is privileged when difficult assessment decisions are being made, and tutors often arbitrate in disagreements between on-site supervisors and off-site practice educators (Henderson, 2010; Finch, 2014; 2015a) - processes from which students feel excluded (Parker, 2010). Bellinger, Ford and Moran (2016, p.210) argue that, despite espousing their increased autonomy, practice educators are "rendered invisible" by the conventions and regulations of university assessment boards where assessment decisions are ultimately made. Practice educators generally feel there is insufficient communication from the university, and off-site practice educators feel they are not taken seriously by university staff when they raise concerns about a placement (Henderson, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010). Rawles (2012/13) identified the disillusionment of practice educators with responses of university staff to their difficulties as a barrier to their continuing to be practice educators. The use of 'university' is not further clarified and may refer to tutors or placement coordinators. With regard to the latter, there are few reports on relations directly between them and practice educators. Nonetheless, students generally find them helpful when raising their concerns if they are prepared to put those concerns in writing, though they would like more information from placement coordinators about placement agencies – not just where they are and what they do, but information about re-structures or difficult team dynamics (Parker, 2010).

Practice educators and their experiences with managers

Practice educators employed in a placement agency rate highly any support they receive from their managers, although such support is rarely available, especially in the statutory sector (Waterhouse, McLagan and Murr, 2011). There is little workload relief from managers for practice educators who therefore have heavy caseloads in addition to their work with students (Plenty and Gower, 2013; Domakin, 2015).

Practice educators' experience of their work - role complexity

Practice educators fulfil many roles as they work with students, tutors, on-site supervisors, managers and placement coordinators. Each role brings its own obligations and entitlements (Rowe, 2008); expectations and identities (Shardlow and Doel, 1996).

Practice educators' role as gatekeepers of the profession and guardians of public safety is to uphold professional standards thereby preventing students unfit or unable to become social workers from doing so (Evans, 1999; Juliusdottir, Hrafnsdottir and Kristjansdottir, 2002; Sowbel, 2012; Robertson 2012/13; Stone, 2018). Gatekeeping is often presented as in tension with, even oppositional to, practice educators' generative role of developing the next generation, a role identified as a primary motivation for becoming a practice

educator (Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Develin and Matthews, 2008; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Finch and Poletti, 2014; Domakin, 2015). Practice educators report experiencing the tension between gatekeeping and generativity as a source of anxiety, stress and distress in the context of failing students (Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch, Schaub and Dalrymple, 2014).

This tension between generativity and gatekeeping roles is mirrored by tension practice educators experience between their roles as facilitators and assessors of learning (Yorke, 2005; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011), roles described as paradoxical for practice educators because they put their egalitarian orientation to enabling learning at odds with their role as examiners (Finch, 2010; Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Finch and Taylor, 2013; Finch and Poletti, 2014; Woods, 2015).

Jasper (2014) argues that disproportionate research interest in assessment results in overemphasising this tension between roles, and undervaluing practice educators' skills as educators. When not being positioned as examiners, (that is, making a pass/fail decision), practice educators combine judgement about students' progression with facilitation of their learning without drawing attention to problematic tension between these two (Stone, 2014b; Jasper and Field, 2016). Wheeler and Greaves (2005) write of simultaneously being guru, guide and gatekeeper with students: offering expertise to draw on, fostering learning, and arbitrating over whether the student belongs in the profession.

These are some insights from the literature about how practice educators experience their role and their relations with others in placements. At this micro level, subsystems of dyads and triads form between different parties as the complex relations to be negotiated and managed across placement agency and university settings are recognised (Meeson, 1998; Beverley and Worsley, 2007; Brodie and Williams, 2013). Practices performed and relations negotiated within placements are nested within a wider socio-economic context of social work and social work education (Lefevre, 2016). At the meso level of social work education, I consider the overlapping space between social work and education in which placements take place.

Meso: The hybrid space of placements

The characters populating placements work in a hybrid space of overlap between higher education provision and social welfare/work provision. Parker (2010) calls this space a “practice learning nexus”, a place of convergence and connection for students’ practice learning. I also use the term nexus to describe placements, following Scollon’s (2001, in Wodak and Meyer) distinction between a nexus of practice and community of practice. For Scollon (2001, in Wodak and Meyer, pp.150-151), a nexus of practice is a linkage, or intersection, of multiple practices coming together for a common purpose (*educating students to become social workers*), recognized by members of a social group (*the parties to the placement*) as repeatable practices in which they participate (*facilitating and assessing learning*). A nexus of practice refers to both the

actions and the actors: the practices and the practitioners. It differs from a community of practice because it is temporary or transient. A community of practice is defined as a group of people consistently interacting towards a common goal, though over time, people and practices may change. In Scollon's (2001, in Wodak and Meyer) interpretation, each placement is a separate nexus of practice because it is convened amongst a group of people who disperse, dissolving the nexus, when the placement is done.

I have chosen the term placement nexus rather than practice learning nexus. I have argued elsewhere that practice learning is learning *in, for* and *from* practice, achieved in classrooms and placements (Nixon and Murr, 2006). Referring to this Bellinger, (2010b) asserts that, while this is possible, "it is not possible to learn *to* practise without embodied participation" in practice (p.2456). Nonetheless, in choosing 'placement nexus', I am hoping to retain a conceptual distinction between 'practice learning' as learning, (unfettered by location, but nonetheless unfulfilled without learning in practice), and 'placement' as a hybrid space between education and social work/welfare institutions in which students learn to become social workers. I do not use practice learning and placement as synonyms.

Parker (2010) describes a placement nexus as a series of force relations between diverse actors with different kinds of power, struggling for dominance. This description is one I returned to repeatedly throughout my analysis of practice educators' stories. My reference to it here serves as an introduction to

the meso level tension between social work/welfare and higher education providers.

Relations between placement providers and universities are often described as partnerships, but the authenticity of the term is questioned (Guransky and Le Sueur, 2012). The difference between employers' and educators' understandings of social work is described in literature dominated by social work academics as a gulf, chasm or dichotomy (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, 2009; Simpson and Murr, 2014; Higgins, 2014; Higgins, Popple and Crichton, 2016; Domakin, 2015).

Contested curricula

One depiction is of a gulf between the academic curriculum and the practice curriculum (practicum). Higgins (2015; 2016; 2017) and Higgins, Popple and Crichton (2016) argue that contemporary social work in practice settings is dominated by a narrow conceptualisation that limits social work to statutory tasks, defined as concern with risk management, legal interventions and managerialist accountabilities (form filling and meeting timescales). It is argued that it is not bureaucratization per se that is problematic, but the limiting of a broad conceptualisation of social work focussed on social justice, human rights and ethical practice, which was influential in the social work reform agenda and which prevails in academia and social work education. In Higgins's (2014) analysis, practice educators are required to bridge the two, but are unable to do

so because they are “frightened” (p.70) by the theoretical knowledge underpinning the broad conception, and “inculcated” (p.70) into the narrow statutory conception, telling students there is no need for theory in their work. In his study, Higgins (2014) concludes that practice educators “were not caught between opposing sides [academy and practice]: but were on the side of practice” (p.71). While Domakin (2015) argues that practice educators do have the capacity to bridge the two worlds, others argue that they are torn apart by them. Practice educators are described as “piggy in the middle” (Taylor and Bogo, 2014), caught between the needs of the work-place and the needs of students (Bogo *et al.*, 2007), and experiencing conflict between education and operational priorities (Bellinger, 2010b). Their position is thought to be isolating (Shapton, 2006/07) and lonely (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011). The literature reports that practice educators could be helped in bridging the worlds of social work education and social work practice more effectively if universities engaged more with placement providers by sharing information and discussing practice education more widely, rather than focussing almost exclusively on facilitating formal processes for allocating and minimally supporting placements (Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Waterhouse, McLagan and Murr, 2011; Plenty and Gower, 2013; Domakin, 2015).

Contested placement settings

The literature also addresses arguments about what counts as a good placement arising from tensions between different conceptions of social work.

The SWTF's (2009a) report that students experienced placements that did not allow them to learn what they needed, influenced the introduction of criteria stating that final placements must prepare students for statutory aspects of social work (SWRB, 2011). There is concern amongst academics and practice educators that the policy of privileging statutory placements fuels dichotomy between the academy and practice, with employers supporting the policy and social work academics contesting it (Scholar *et* al., 2012; Jasper *et al.*, 2013; Bellinger, Ford and Moran, 2016; Neal and Regan, 2016). Bellinger (2010a; 2010b) argues that an agency's approach to pedagogy should be privileged, so that students are in placements encouraging debate and co-constructing knowledge with them, rather than treating them as passive recipients of instruction. She asserts that in failing to attend to the pedagogy of practice education, the distinction between practice *learning* and practice *experience* is lost, and educating students for a profession is lost to the training of students for a job. Scholar *et* al. (2012) and Jasper *et al.* (2013) also caution against an assumption that better practice learning occurs in a placement simply because it offers opportunities to experience statutory practice. Bates (2018) reported practice educators' awareness that non-statutory placements could provide opportunities for critical reflection difficult to foster in local authorities with prescriptive remits (p.53). Nonetheless, both types of placement settings present challenges for practice educators. Those working with students in local authority settings may need to ensure there is opportunity for critical debate about the nature of statutory practice, while those working with students in non-statutory settings, aware of the placement criteria, may need to exploit their links with other organizations to find enhanced experiences in order to fulfil

regulatory requirements (Bellinger, 2010b; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Bates, 2018).

Contested telos

Another depiction of the different priorities of universities and employers is that the former are argued to be educating students to think critically and be concerned with ethical debate, while the latter are looking for newly qualified social workers who are ready to function with little additional help (Jasper *et al.*, 2013; Higgins, 2014; 2015). However, dichotomy between stakeholders in social work education is not easily represented as linear polarity. Lishman (2009) contests that the divide exists only between the academy and employers. Stating that managerialism "has not been kind" to practice education (Lishman, 2009, p.185), she argues that a divide between desire for critical thinking, reflective practitioners and desire for functionally ready employees exists between the social work profession and local authorities.

Depiction of division between stakeholders' desired outcomes for social work education overlaps with discussion about whether social work education is an ongoing developmental process, extending into post-qualifying development, or is product oriented, ending with the qualification of the student (Moriarty *et al.*, 2011; Taylor and Bogo, 2014; Higgins, 2016; 2017). Practice educators' use of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) is drawn on in this debate. Coverage of the shift from a competency-based approach to the use of a

framework of capabilities is beyond the scope of this thesis, though it is covered well in research (Stone, 2014b; Jasper and Field, 2016; Higgins, Popple and Crichton, 2016; Burton, 2018; Wiles, 2017). Of interest here are reports that practice educators have generally welcomed the PCF and the emphasis on progressive and continuous development. Practice educators value the focus on practice it brings in supervision, its usefulness in helping students conceptualise their developmental trajectory, (because its nine domains are set out across nine levels of progression spanning qualifying and post-qualifying education), and its capacity to support development of professional identity through the knowledge, leadership and professionalism domains (Jasper *et al.*, 2013; Stone, 2014a; Jasper and Field, 2016). Both Higgins (2016; 2017) and Wiles (2017) discuss how the PCF supports the broader conception of social work, offering opportunity for "more nuanced and critically reflective social work" (Wiles, 2017, pp.357-358). They also both argue that the social work reform agenda's process-oriented education has been undermined by successive governments, because "the PCF's developmental model of learning is not relevant to the type of practice which employers require" (Higgins, 2016, p.1991). Bellinger, Ford and Moran (2016) argue that both the institutions of welfare and education are compromised by neoliberal agendas requiring them to adopt the business model approaches that exacerbate tensions between them. They call on educators in practice and the academy to work together to negate the dichotomies imposed upon them.

In the above, I have considered some of the tensions between education and social work/welfare, social work professionals, employers and educators. These

tensions impact on practice educators as they work in the hybrid space of placements. Further discussion, however, requires understanding of the wider socio-political macro context influencing this space.

Macro: Stakeholder conflicts and their impact on social work education

Tillema, Smith and Leshem (2011) identified three factors at a macro level contributing to difficulties for practice education across health professions: low congruence between what key stakeholders want to achieve; limited alignment between stakeholders' performance standards; and poor stability of governance as successive governments establish and abolish regulatory and professional bodies. I use these factors to structure discussion of the impact of national scale influences on social work education.

There are multiple stakeholders in social work, each bringing its own perspectives to bear on what the purpose of social work should be: for example, whether it is for the reform or regulation of society. This longstanding dispute makes social work education problematic because of the lack of consensus about what or who a social work student is being educated to do or become (Osborne, 1988; Humphries, 1997; Harris, 2003; Bates, 2008; Goodyer and Higgins, 2009; Hugman, 2009; Dickens, 2011; Simpson and Murr, 2014; Donovan, Rose and Connolly, 2017; Bates, 2018). The following extract from Hansard continues to be relevant:

> "… society as a whole cannot make up its mind whether it wants social workers to help police society for bad families, to relieve it of personal neighbourly responsibilities to the unfortunate, to dispense public charity, or to ensure that public charity is not misused" (HC Debate, 28th February 1986, Hansard).

Although I intend to concentrate discussion on tensions between stakeholders within the profession, the involvement of those outside it is noted. The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) (2016) has stated:

> "Compared to other professions we regulate, social work appears to generate more interest and involvement from stakeholders outside of the profession. Social work and its qualifying education is under frequent review and is in constant flux" (HCPC, 2016, p.40).

Low congruence between contrasting, often competing, teleological goals means stakeholders value different qualities in newly qualified social workers: Higher Education Institutes want graduates 'fit for award'; regulatory bodies - graduates 'fit for registration'; professional bodies - registrants 'fit for practice'; employers - newly qualified social workers 'fit for purpose'; and service users - social workers who are advocates for them, more than employees of social services (Goodyer and Higgins, 2009; Moriarty *et al.*, 2011; Taylor and Bogo, 2014). This valuing of different qualities creates limited alignment between each stakeholder's descriptors for competent performance. At the implementation of

the reformed degree, Taylor and Bogo (2014) examined the differences between the regulatory body's Standards of Proficiency (SoPs) (Health and Care Professions Council, 2012) and the professional body's Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (TCSW, 2012b), and found fault-lines between them, along which they predicted social work would split. The fault-lines they identified were different orientations to ethics, research, knowledge, genericism and specialism, and to holistic and mechanistic assessment practices. However, before the reformed degree had completed its first year, two government reviews of social work education were commissioned, one by the Minister for Care and Support and the other by the secretary of State for Education, which destabilized the reform agenda (Simpson and Murr, 2014; Wiles, 2017). Croisdale-Appleby's (2014) review called for social work students to be educated to become practitioners, professionals and social scientists. Narey's (2014) perpetuated Conservative discourse that the social work curriculum is too theoretical and left leaning (Pinker, 2002; Phibbs, 2012, Gove, 2013). Croisdale-Appleby's (2014) review reflects the broad conception of social work, while Narey's (2014) reflects the narrow (Higgins, 2016; Wiles, 2017). Interestingly, they both agreed that social work education needed less regulation with which to comply, recommending a single document for curriculum design and consolidation of different assessment standards into a single assessment regime ((Narey, 2014; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014). Nonetheless, despite calls for *less* guidance from *fewer* institutions, with the publication of Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) (DfE, 2014; DH, 2015), social work education received *more* documents to take into account when preparing students for qualification.

These policy issues impact on practice educators by giving them a multiplicity of regulatory requirement with which to contend. Wiles (2017) and Bates (2018) report the confusion that practice educators experience when asked about the fit between the different stakeholders' measures of performance (that is, Standards of Proficiency, Professional Capabilities Framework, and various Knowledge and Skills Statements). Most practice educators reported being guided by their understanding of placement criteria and the PCF, and trusted in universities' mapping of these against other requirements (Wiles, 2017; Bates, 2018).

The situation is exacerbated by poor stability in the governance structures of social work and social work education. The Health and Care Professions Council took over the regulation of social work and social work education from the General Social Care Council in 2012 and was replaced by Social Work England (SWE) in 2019. The College of Social Work, opened in 2012, closed in 2015, with some responsibilities transferred to the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). Changes in governance structure directly impact on practice educators as they contend with multiple regulatory practice standards that undergo revision following the changes.

The above review addresses topics identified prior to starting my research analysis and includes literature published during the analysis, as I maintained the currency of the review. I read literature on additional topics but have not included these because they have not proven pertinent to the unfolding

research narrative. What follows is a review of literature on boundaries, as it became apparent that these were a central, unifying thread within the stories.

Coda to the literature review - boundaries and boundary workers

The review above makes implied references to boundaries in the landscape of practice education. There are boundaries between the several roles within an overarching role of being a practice educator. Such boundaries include those between different parties within the placement nexus (educator, on-site supervisor, tutor, manager and student), boundaries of authority within and between institutions, and boundaries of accountability within and between those institutions, including accountability to the profession, to the public, to students and to employers. There are also jurisdiction boundaries around such practices as assessment, workload allocation and supervision. It was not until I was analysing practice educators' stories that I began to understand the boundaried nature of the practice learning landscape and to appreciate practice educators as boundary workers. This prompted me to review literature on this topic.

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) argue that boundaries serve useful purposes and in themselves are neither good nor bad. Boundaries can promote efficiency, effectiveness and cooperation by organizing divisions of labour within prescribed professional roles (Slembrouck and Hall, 2014). They can establish the limits for safe, acceptable and unacceptable practice (Doel *et al.*, 2010). Although working at or across boundaries can be harmonious and

collaborative, it can also be acrimonious where the boundary is a space of misunderstanding and confusion (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015a). Their creation and maintenance are expressions of power (Heite, 2012) and they can be/come areas where authority is disputed. Boundaries are spaces within, and over, which jurisdiction and hierarchy is contested or confirmed (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015).

Category boundaries are significant because categorization is one way in which sense is made of people, their actions and work. Category boundaries become manifest in the policies and procedures that establish boundaries for particular roles, for example educators, tutors, on-site supervisors, students (Mäkitalo, 2014). Boundary objects, such as roles and responsibilities documents, assessment criteria and templates for meetings, enable people within different role categories meaningfully to align and negotiate their collective work (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015). Nonetheless, Slembrouck and Hall (2014, p61) note that “us-them boundaries matter” in establishing divisiveness at different levels of scale, and argue that, while boundaries can serve central stabilizing functions between two categories, they can also be used to destabilize relations between them (Slembrouck and Hall, 2014).

Those who work in boundaried landscapes can be referred to as boundary spanners (Hoe, 2006; Williams, 2011; Oliver, 2013), boundary workers (Hart *et al.*, 2013) and systems conveners (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015b). They are terms referring to those who “spend much time acting,

working and thinking at boundaries" (Hart *et al.*, 2013, p282), who work at the boundaries of their own and others' organizations (Hoe, 2006, p9), who span boundaries with diverse groups of people from different professions and sectors (Williams, 2011, p30), and who negotiate effectively with others working at the same boundaries (Oliver, 2013, p777). All these descriptions fit the work of practice educators, whom I have chosen to refer to as boundary workers.

For Williams (2011), another feature of boundary workers is their sharing of a common purpose but, although practice educators share the task of educating social workers, the extent to which this is a common purpose is arguable because of the level of disagreement between stakeholders about the nature and purpose of social work. Hart *et al.* (2013) argue that boundary working requires an approach to practice that recognises the need to make connections between people across different organizations, sectors and cultures, "brokering and translating varying perspectives, and facilitating the application of ways of seeing and doing across different domains" (p282). Slembrouck and Hall (2014) recognise the simultaneously enabling and constraining nature of boundary work as potential is opened up through cross border collaboration, and closed down by 'turf wars' over territory, jurisdiction and control. In a comment evocative of Parker's (2010) description of the placement nexus noted above, Williams (2011, p.29) describes work at the boundary as work that:

> "brings together a diverse range of stakeholders from different backgrounds, professions, sectors, cultures or organizations, who view

> the world in different ways, embrace different professional practices and ways of working, and are stimulated to work cooperatively through different motivations" (Williams, 2011, p.29).

Williams (2011) and Oliver (2013) state that effective boundary working skills include understanding the different interests of different parties, building and sustaining good working relationships, being able to negotiate, being able to communicate well through listening, empathy, tact and diplomacy, and being able to resolve conflict. Oliver (2013, p.778) argues that the skills of boundary workers enable them to exert "relational agency" to broker agreements, resolve differences and achieve cooperation in environments where power is dispersed across systems. Tew (2011, pp.49-50) refers to agency as "*power to*", arguing that it can be productively deployed as the power to protect, to cooperate, to safeguard others' interests and to promote collective action through negotiation and collaboration. He also argues that agency can be limiting when deployed as the power to collude, exclude or oppress. Williams (2011, p.31) concludes that boundary workers face complexity, ambiguity and paradox from the opposing forces of self-interest and collaboration, from managing different forms of hierarchy, from being subject to multiple accountabilities, and from managing without having power over others.

The literature reviewed offers insight into practice educators' experiences within the boundaried landscape of practice education, a landscape that sees power and complexity diffused across multiple levels of scale, multiple settings,

multiple stakeholders and multiple sources of knowledge, authority and influence (Cashman *et al.,* 2015). I have considered their experiences in micro-system of placements, placements that take place in a hybrid space between social work practice and social work education. This hybrid space is itself subject to wider socio-political influences. Personal experience of educating students at a local level is nested within structural regulation and professional obligation spanning micro, meso and macro levels of scale. Pedagogy is political (Higgins, 2015).

Within the literature, multiple narratives of practice educators are produced, re-produced, tested and contested. These narratives are evident in the metaphors and language use of the reviewed articles. They include the 'struggle for the soul of social work' played out in social work education (Higgins, 2015; Wiles, 2017), the 'failings' of practice educators (Finch, 2010; Shapton, 2006/07); on-site supervisors as 'neglected partners' (Henderson, 2010); and practice educators as 'outsiders' (Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Hazel, 2016); 'bridges' (Domakin, 2015); 'piggy in the middle' (Taylor and Bogo, 2014); and guru, guide, guardian and gatekeeper (Evans, 1999; Wheeler and Greaves, 2005; Parker, 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Simpson and Murr, 2012/13) . Some narratives foreground the agency of practice educators, while others imply their status as pawns in a game rather than pioneers within a changing landscape. It is the potential of this literature to provide practice educators with narrative resources for story-telling that is important for my interpretation of their stories. What I mean by this is explained in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Methodology, design & implementation strategy

In this chapter, I reiterate the research statement, justify the research design (qualitative), philosophical framing (interpretivist) and strategy (narrative inquiry), and explain the research processes and procedures adopted.

The research statement

This research aims to create fresh understanding of what it means to be a practice educator. It contributes to professional knowledge by offering insights into practice educators' perception of and positioning in the education of social work students in the workplace, and models dialogical narrative analysis as a form of critical appreciation of practice.

The research questions are:

- What do practice educators' stories tell us about who practice educators are?
- How do practice educators hold their own in their stories, against whom are they holding their own, and at whose expense? (By "hold their own", I mean seek to sustain their value, as individuals or a collective, in response to what threatens their worth.)
- What is at stake in the stories? (By which I mean, that which is at risk, or in jeopardy, in the stories.)

How the research was designed

A desire to carry out ethical and well-designed research guided my research planning. I address the ethical nature of the research later in the chapter. I begin by establishing the congruence between the constituent parts of the research, and their fit within a coherent philosophical framing.

Design and designer: an interpretivist framing

I am interested in how different practice educators interpret their experiences within the world of social work education. My research is more exploratory than explanatory, and seeks meaning rather than measurement. As such it lends itself to a qualitative design with an interpretivist framing. Interpretivism is a philosophical worldview bringing together qualitative research approaches that foreground meaning-making activities (Cousin, 2009; Creswell, 2018). Interpretivism is concerned with subjective human experience, from which multiple and varied meanings are negotiated socially through sense-making (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2018). A qualitative design within an interpretivist framing provides a good fit for this research because it seeks to explore the meaning-making of practice educators about their experience.

The fit between the designed and the designer is also coherent, given my beliefs about reality and knowledge. I commit to an ontology in which social reality is 'mind-dependent' (Braun and Clarke, 2013), that is, not independent of our knowledge of it; and to an epistemology in which knowledge is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This interpretivist worldview influences how I understand and problematize my research interest. My philosophical views mean that there always already was a likelihood that I would draw on research designs consistent with this philosophical framing.

Research strategy: narrative inquiry

In the introduction, I explained that I widened the scope of my research from its initial focus solely on assessment after discovering in the pilot study that practice educators spoke of facilitating and assessing learning as seamlessly interwoven practices. Having made that decision, I anticipated that analysis of practice educators' stories would provide strong insights into how they make sense of their experiences, and therefore I chose narrative inquiry as the research strategy (Riessman, 2001; 2008; Frank, 2010). Storying experience is argued to be a significant way in which humans construct meaning from events, incidents, relationships and life (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008; Savin-Baden and Van-Niekerk, 2007; Bamberg, 2011). In her rationale for choosing to analyse stories, Temelkuran (2019) argues that they are not only transmitters of human

experience, but also a remedy for troubles. Shay (2006; 2008a) suggests that people's descriptions and accounts of their experience carry their explanations of and theories about them. Selectively reporting an experience, for example, telling the story of the experience, reveals the meaning made of it (Riessman, 2001; Honkasilta, Vehkakoski and Vehmas, 2016). For these reasons, studying the stories people tell is a good way to understand their experience and sense made of it (Riessman, 2001; Hancock, 2016).

However, there is debate in the field of narrative inquiry about the extent to which humans are defined by being "storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990 p.2). Some conclude that life is storied (Sarbin, 2001), that the life as led and the life as told are inseparable (Bruner, 2004) and that narrativity defines us as human (Squire, 2008). However, because of my unease about suggestions that the only life worth living is a storied one (Bruner, 2004), a position that may inadvertently devalue un-storied human lives, I have adopted Meretoja's (2014) conceptualization that narrative-sense-making is integral to, rather than definitive of, human existence.

The distinction between narrative and story

In this narrative inquiry, analysis is focused on the collected stories of practice educators, while the phenomenon being studied is narrative (Bauer, 1996; Savin-Baden and Van-Niekerk, 2007; Creswell, 2018). The distinction between story and narrative I draw is that stories are individuals' sense-making accounts of events, incidents or experiences in life, while narratives are more overarching, and are created from stories with consistent storylines, shared themes and similar characteristics. For example, there are individual stories of people in poverty finding fame and fortune that belong in 'rags to riches' narratives. There is a bi-directional relationship between stories and narratives. Stories are used to describe events, people, ideas, feelings and experiences, and these evolve into narratives through social interaction in the communities within which the stories circulate (Sluzki, 1992). As stories create narratives, so narratives shape human experience by providing templates for meaning-making and resources for story-telling, such as stock characters, genres, and plot (Frank, 2010; Patterson, 2008; Bolton and Delderfield, 2018). A story-teller's explanation is as follows:

> "Stories etch grooves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a mountainside. And each time fresh actors tread the path of the story, the groove runs deeper. This is called the theory of narrative causality and it means that a story, once started, *takes a shape*. It picks up all the vibrations of all the other workings of that story that have ever been" (Pratchett, 1991 p.8).

As story-telling is a means of making sense of experience, so narrative is a storied way of knowing (Riessman, 2004). It is for this reason that I anticipated that a narrative inquiry, involving the analysis of practice educators' stories, would enable me to understand better their perception of and position in the landscape of social work education. However, narrative inquiry is a diverse field (Riessman, 2008) and therefore I have set out below the ideas of narrative and story used in this research. These ideas address three key statements. Firstly, meaning is made of experience and communicated through stories and storytelling (Riessman, 2004; Savin-Baden and van-Niekerk, 2007). Secondly, stories are performative; they are told for a purpose and their purpose is achieved in the ways they are told; to whom they are told; and why they are told (McCormack, 2009; Frank, 2010). Thirdly, multiple stories circulate within groups (for example, families, workplaces, professions, neighbourhoods) forming an ecology of intertwining competing, confirming and contesting stories with different dominance at different times in different contexts (Sluzki, 1992; Gadsby, 2017).

Narrative as a means of making sense of experience

Within narrative theory, storytelling is viewed as integral to human existence (Meretoja, 2014; Squire, 2008). Humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990), are surrounded by and live within stories that teach us who we are, where we belong, how to behave well, what our social and political positions in the world are, and what to expect of ourselves and others in our world (Frank, 2010; Hickson, 2015;

Bolton and Delderfield, 2018). Stories are imbued with values that can transmit moral order or disorder (Sluzki, 1992). In telling and hearing stories, meaning is made, reaffirmed, modified and re-created (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This is an ongoing process as new experiences are storied, and old experiences re-storied.

Meaning-making in storytelling is often supported by a structure of sequence and consequence, which generally takes characters from their situation at a beginning, through some significant, often disrupting experience, to an ending position different from where they began (Patterson, 2008; Bolton and Delderfield, 2018). Structuring a story with a beginning, middle and end brings coherence, causality or contingency to experience that provides a means of making sense of that experience (Salmon and Riessman, 2008). This has particular significance for my research because of the temporal structure of time limited placements that begin with practice learning agreements, proceed to mid-point reviews and conclude with a final assessment report. Structuring a story within the temporal flow of a placement, such that events are understood to belong 'after-this-but-before-that' as they are selected and connected by the storyteller, supports the conveyance of their meaning (Riessman, 2004; Frank, 2010).

The value of meaning made in storytelling is contested. Strawson (2004) argues that the process of reviewing past experience, re/interpreting it to re/produce it in an ordered story, distorts reality and truth, and projects onto

them meaning they inherently lack. In response, I argue, as do Sluzki (1992) and Meretoja (2014), that whether or not life has meaning, and whether such meaning could be found, are questions separate from whether or not humans seek to find life meaningful. Humans engage in ongoing meaning-making through telling and re-telling stories, irrespective of whether that meaning corresponds to the world as it is.

> "Reality may lack meaningful order but we still need stories to bear, unsettle and transform us as we journey through the labyrinth of our lives. Stories are interpretations but never mere interpretations: they take part in weaving, unravelling and reconstructing the fragile fabric of our narrative existence" (Meretoja, 2014, p230).

In my analytic interpretation of stories, I am seeking credibility rather than certainty, enlargement of understanding rather than explanation, and what rings true within a rationally defensible argument, rather than rationally irrefutable truth (Cousin, 2009; Frank, 2010; D'Cruz and Jones, 2014).

Stories as purposeful, performative, creative constructs

Related to the ontological consideration of stories' relationship to reality is an epistemological understanding that notions of literal truth in this context are meaningless because stories are always told from someone's particular

point of view (D'Cruz and Jones, 2014). Not only so, but they are told from that point of view to a particular audience for a particular purpose (Riessman, 2004; Frank, 2010). Although a story may recount an event, and irrespective of how closely a narrator follows events as they happened, the story has purpose beyond the events (Patterson, 2008). The story is told so that it can perform its purposes, for example, to persuade, confirm, contest, endorse or deny. Stories are creative constructs, shaped by narrators from the perspective of their concerns, fears, hopes and desires in order to perform their purposes (McCormack, 2009; Savin-Baden and van-Niekerk, 2007; Meretoja, 2014). Narrators actively reconstruct experience into stories for the purpose of the present telling (Patterson, 2008). Such constructing and reconstructing of experience is not mechanistic. Storytelling is learned within cultures through constant exposure until it becomes "second nature" (Frank, 2010, p.121).

Frank (2010, 2012) refers to the purposes of stories as their "work" and argues that stories have capacities that enable them to perform this work. These capacities include depicting character, presenting a compelling point of view, resolving or stirring up trouble, portraying what counts as good and what may be dangerous, telling truth, or sometimes lies, and opening portals to other stories. Frank (2010) proposes that analysis of these capacities can reveal what matters to story tellers and why. He argues that stories impart a sense of self and teach people who they are; that they construct relationships around shared stories, affiliating some people while excluding others (Frank, 2010). Narratives become embedded within and across

social and cultural contexts, shaping the way experience is made sense of in those contexts through stories (Frank, 2010). Adopting Frank's (2010; 2012) analytic approach enables me to explore the research questions by studying practice educators' stories as they are told and circulate within the landscape of social work education. This brings me to the concept of an ecology of stories.

The ecology of stories and narratives

Stories and narratives are construed in this research as shared forms of making and communicating meaning (Riessman, 2004; Frank, 2010, Brown, 2017). Narrative creation and story-telling are interactional, socio-cultural processes (Frank, 2010; Smith, 2013, in Braun and Clarke, 2013). Bolton and Delderfield (2018) propose that stories form themselves into complex systems from interrelated plots, situations and characters and that these systems are dynamic because they are in constant flux from new experiences (p89). Frank (2010) refers to this as 'narrative habitus', a repertoire of stories recognised and shared within a group, which is the embodied repository of their tacit knowledge. Sluzki (1992) describes this as the 'ecology of stories'. Every given story is perceived to be embedded in a complex network of reciprocally influencing, confirming or conflicting narratives across personal, familial, community and cultural contexts, and lives are organized around dominant narratives in multiple story systems (Sluzki, 1992). Voices in stories are always understood in relation to this

wider context (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). Narrative analysts explore multiple stories, not in a quest for a single point of view, but for complementary, contradictory and competing views, a quest that sits comfortably within interpretivism (Thody, 1997). Consistent with this, my analysis attends to connections between practice educators' stories within the study, and between them and others circulating in social work practice education (Frank, 2010; Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2008). From here, it is not a big leap to Frank's (2010) dialogical narrative analysis. Frank (2010) argues that stories are provisionally independent of people because, once told, they are released to do their work, to be retold and to evolve in their retelling. For Frank (2010) dialogical narrative analysis involves thinking about one story with another story, and he refers to this as thinking *with* stories. The research goal is for the analyst to generate a new narrative from the stories they think with, a narrative that offers fresh understanding of storytellers' problems and helps them deal with those problems (Frank, 2010).

Reflexivity

Within this research, I am a member of the community in which these stories circulate. I am not disinterested. I hear and tell stories of social work practice education. In my research, I recognise two potential influences on the storytelling. Firstly, I recognise what Patterson (2008) calls 'local context', by which she means the research context in which the conversation between

researcher and participant takes places. This includes consideration of my relationships with participants, and the influence of who I am perceived to be by them in my various identities as tutor, peer and researcher. Secondly, I recognise that my behaviours during the research conversation (body language, facial expression, tone of responses) influence the story-telling. This influence on story-telling, variously referred to as audience-influenced (Frank, 2010), co-construction (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012), mutual construction (Savin-Baden and van-Niekerk, 2007) or emplotment (Gadsby, 2017), requires reflexive recognition.

I have so far argued that narrative inquiry, in the form of dialogical narrative analysis, is a legitimate design for this research because (1) stories are a human form of meaning making, and by telling stories meaning is communicated; (2) stories are told for various purposes, analysis of which can offer fresh understandings for storytellers, and (3) multiple stories form a complex and dynamic ecology of confirming, contesting and competing stories, analysis of which can offer fresh insight into story-tellers' perceptions of and positioning within their worlds. A narrative inquiry is the chosen strategy because of the richness of the data (the stories) generated. My chosen means of interpreting these is dialogical narrative analysis, which I explain next.

Dialogical Narrative Analysis

A method of questioning

Dialogical narrative analysis, described by Frank (2010; 2012) as a 'practice of criticism', is a method of questioning I have used to analyse the stories collected in this study (Figure 1).

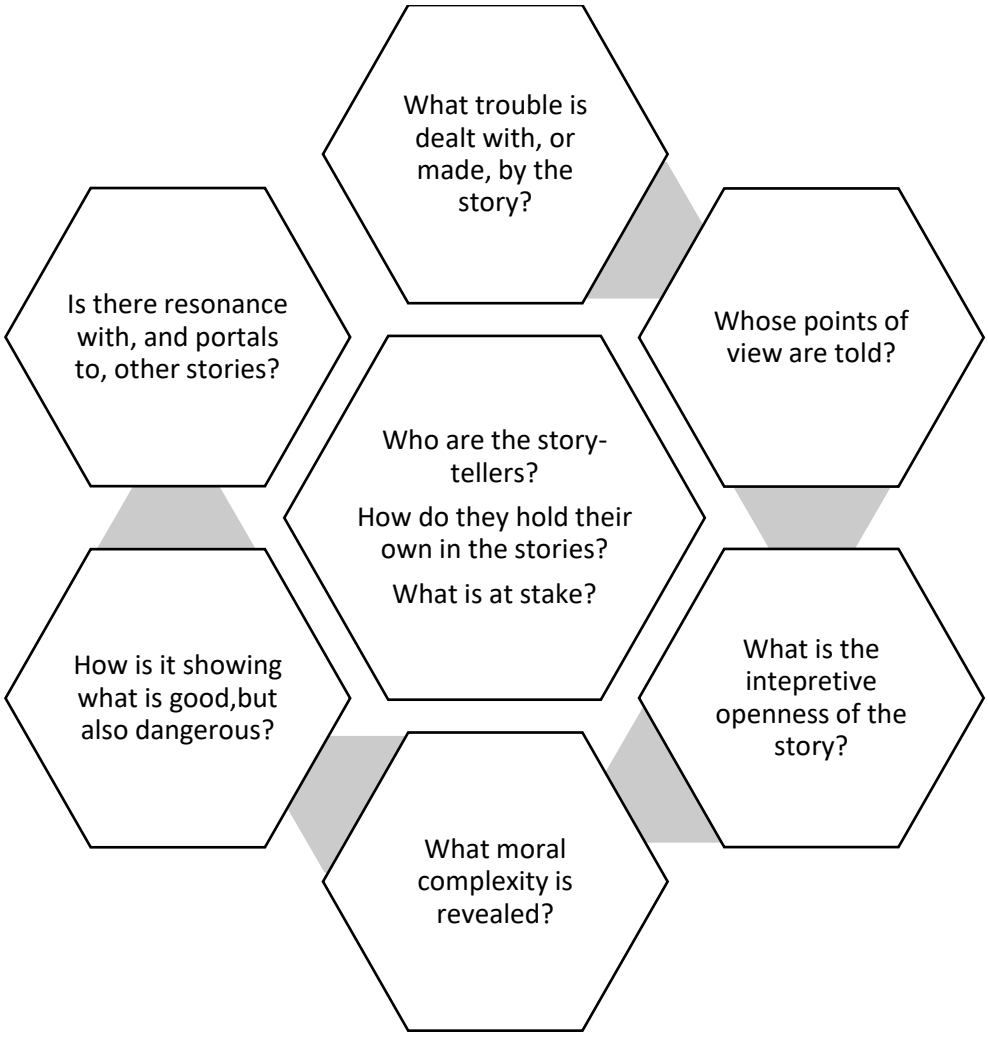

Figure 1. *A method of questioning*

Frank (2010; 2012) proposes that stories can be analysed by asking about their capacity to depict character, deal with or cause trouble, present a perspective, open up or close down multiple interpretations, reveal moral complexity, and resonate with other stories. Using these as a basis for questioning, I created story analysis templates with which to explore collected stories (Figure 1 and Appendix 7).

Frank (2010) refers to his proposed form of dialogical analysis as “socio-narratology”, which I liken to Sluzki’s (1992) metaphor of the ecosystem of stories. Dialogical analysis of stories explores relations, connections and influencing factors within and between stories circulating in communities. As already noted, the narration of stories shapes the people and communities in which they are told, and narratives evolve in the telling of stories. Meretoja (2014) states, “life and its narrative interpretation are always intertwined” (p147), and therefore analysis is always dialogic as these reciprocal constituting relations are explored. Analysis is dialogic because it does not explore stories in isolation but, to borrow Benjamin’s (1999) metaphor, explores the craftsmanship of the storyteller as a story is fashioned for the audience from personal experiences and those of others. Such analysis is dialogic because it attends to the different voices subsumed by a teller within a story, and the different voices calling out between stories. Furthermore, in dialogical analysis, the ongoing dialogue between analyst and analysis is maintained in order to recognise the multiple layers of interpretation. A story analysed is always an analyst’s interpretation of a storyteller’s interpretation of their experience (Patterson, 2008). My own dialogue with the collected

stories, the perceived dialogue between collected stories, and perceived dialogue between the collected stories and those in wider circulation, are all explored. This dialogue becomes the analysis as connections, disconnections and resistances between practice educators' stories are identified.

In summary, analysis is dialogic within Frank's (2010; 2012) conceptualization, when there is commitment to (1) the idea that no voice is ever singular but is constituted of multiple voices; (2) an understanding that, although people tell stories that are their own, they do not make these stories by themselves, but from the stories circulating around them; (3) consideration of multiple layers of interpretation between stories, storytellers, audience and analyst.

That which counts as a story in this dialogical narrative analysis

I acknowledge that there are many understandings of what constitutes a story. These include autobiographical, life-long stories (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990) and 'small stories', told in everyday conversation of ongoing experience, hypothetical events, interrupted reflection and incoherent testimony (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008; Phoenix, 2008; Salmon and Riessman, 2008). In my research, stories are "brief, topically specific stories organized around characters, setting and plot" (Riessman, 2004, p706). Plot is understood to be that which influences "the flow of the action"

(Crossley, 2000 p.46), bringing the sequence and consequence that create a story within the definition adopted for this research.

A Labovian structure is taken as my starting place for the identification of stories (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). This draws on a belief that there exists a socially shared conception of the elements required for a story. These Labovian elements are:

- an *abstract* (gives notice that a story is about to be told)
- *an orientation* (the what, why, when, where and/or who of the story)
- *a complicating event,* (what happened)
- *a response or a resolution* (what then happened as a result)
- *an evaluation* (the 'so what? of the story': its meaning to the teller)
- *a coda* (marking the end of that speaker's turn in conversation).

McCormack (2004) also takes Labovian structure as her starting point for the identification of stories, but suggests it is insufficient alone for their analysis. She advocates extending a story beyond its Labovian boundary to include additional narrative phenomena: *description*, giving detail about people, places or things; *argumentation*, introducing into a story something from outside of it that adds meaning to what is being told; *theorizing*, explaining or reflecting on told experience; and *augmentation*, adding to an already told story memories stimulated by later conversation (McCormack, 2004, pp.223-224). I drew on this schema of narrative phenomena to help me identify

where to begin and end the stories I re/present in this thesis. For example, Angela, Belinda and Eleanor all returned later in their interview-conversations to augment earlier tellings, and Belinda told a story within a story to support an argument she was making about first placement practice educators.

In summary, what constitutes a story in this research takes a Labovian approach to “naturally occurring stories” (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2008 p.7) and combines this with wider phenomena of identifiable narrative processes (McCormack, 2004).

How the research was conducted (see Appendix 1 for Information Sheet)

In addition to being defensible in design, good research needs to be rigorous in its conduct and credible, dependable and confirmable in its claims (Spencer *et al.*, 2003; Hannes, 2011). I now address these ethical considerations.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval

I was granted ethical approval for this research in accordance with the University of Wolverhampton's regulations (Appendix 2). In the research, I have adhered to ethical principles of honesty, by correct acknowledgement of the work of others and truthful reporting of my research; of integrity, by being transparent in reporting and sharing the research; of accountability, by complying with research and student researcher regulations; of cooperation, by engaging in open discussion with other researchers; and of care, safety and respect, by avoiding harm to participants and to me, and by honouring the expertise and experience of participants (University of Wolverhampton).

Informed and valid consent

All participants were offered written information about the research (Appendix 1) before deciding to take part and offered opportunity to ask clarifying questions. The information provided included description of what the research was about, participants' anticipated time commitment, arrangements for interviews, and their right to confidentiality and to withdraw from the research. Doubts about the mental capacity of participants to give

consent did not arise. Consent was given in writing on signed consent sheets (Appendix 3) which I safely stored.

Confidentiality and data protection

I have protected the identity of participants by using pseudonyms and omitting from this thesis details that would make their identity known. Nonetheless, there remains the possibility that individuals are identifiable from their stories and this risk was stated on participants' information sheet. The personal data and identity of participants has been further protected by the secure storage of documents.

Trustworthiness, credibility, dependability and confirmability

The trustworthiness of my research begins with its defensible design and is sustained by the transparency of my positioning within it. In the Introduction, I acknowledged my recognition that I have a standpoint as a social work practice educator within this research, and that as such, I am in and of this social world, and see it through the lens of my own experience (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Despite being inescapably part of this social world, my interrogation of interpretations and my participation in regular research supervision support my commitment to producing a trustworthy thesis.

I am also known by the participants because they are practice educators to students from Wolverhampton University. In the process of gaining ethical approval, I demonstrated that I would not coerce participation, or otherwise behave collusively, nor seek to deny the range of relations that subsist between participants and me. There are significant strengths of being known, and of being known to know this field. I believe it enabled participants to get to issues of current concern to them, knowing that I too was caught up in similar concerns. I believe there was a perception that I understood what they were talking about, and that they need not keep explaining terms and processes. In these respects, I was perceived to be an insider and my mutual status as a practice educator facilitated trust (Sherwin, 2016). By one participant, I believe I was positioned as a knowing listener, and the interview became a cathartic release for a long remembered difficult experience. However, these same points also raised dilemmas. As an insider, I was positioned by some as an ally, someone who, it was presumed, agreed with them. By others, I was positioned as 'part of the problem' of social work education, someone who was no longer a social work practitioner and therefore unable to understand the priorities and realities of practice. The insider/outsider positioning was not clear cut, and reflected a continuum of positions rather than contrasting ones (D'Cruz and Jones, 2014; Sherwin, 2016).

The credibility of claims I make for the knowledge generated in this research is supported by the use of quotations and paraphrased speech, verifiable by reference to the recorded interviews. The claims I make are not for

generalizable truth, but for representations of participants' experiences that ring true (Fook, 2001; Frank, 2010). Such claims will be supported by the way data holds true for those within social work practice education.

The dependability of the research is supported by traceable and documented decision-making and by my reflexive account of the research process. Examples of my reflexivity include my expression of my interpretivist beliefs; my recognition that I am a practitioner researcher, with a stand point as a practice educator within this research; my acknowledgement of my positioning along an insider/outsider continuum; my understanding of my influence on the stories told; my acceptance that my interpretations are made because of who I am and that other interpretations will be made by other people. Subjectivity, however reflexive, does not entitle me to privilege my perspective within the research, nor anyone else's. I have a responsibility to listen to and take account of different voices, and adhere to an ethical commitment not to present my interpretation as the single definitive interpretation.

The confirmability of the research is supported through its grounding in the stories (data), my transparency in the process of gathering and analysing them and in my reflexive practices. The power of stories is that people get caught up in them and in the characters. Nonetheless, interpretation is focussed on the stories as I have re/presented them and not on the creation of distorting portrayals of individual storytellers.

Processes and procedures

Choosing participants

My starting point was to gather the names of practice educators working with University of Wolverhampton social work students on placement. From this list of names, I used purposeful sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011) to send participation requests to independent and employed practice educators from different practice settings and geographical locations, and worked within different models of practice education (for example, on-site or off-site). Although I was not carrying out research requiring a representative sample, I was nonetheless interested in the idea of gathering stories from a breadth of backgrounds. There was one exclusion criterion used; I did not invite for interview anyone recently engaged in acrimonious decision-making that had involved me. My decision was finely balanced between lacking the courage to interview them and genuinely believing the invitation would not be well-received.

I sent out twelve initial invitations to practice educators by email. I attached to the email an information sheet about the research (Appendix 1) and gave instruction on what to do if they were willing to be interviewed. Five did not reply and one declined. To the six expressing willingness to participate, I confirmed arrangements for where and when they preferred to be interviewed and sent a consent form. I had thought I would need to interview

ten practice educators to generate a sufficient sample of stories, but I gathered over forty stories from the first six participants interviewed. This influenced a decision not to follow-up the five who had not responded or to recruit further participants. Of the six practice educators interviewed, one had recently experienced a distressing trauma. She told no Labovian-style stories and I have not included our interview-conversation in this thesis.

Relational reflexivity with participants

Angela, a Local Authority social worker, was the first practice educator I interviewed. We know each other because we attend the same regional social work education meetings, she has been practice educator to some of my tutees and regularly attends our verification meetings (also called practice assessment panels). Angela works across a number of universities. When difficult decisions need to be made, I will often consult Angela as I trust her judgement. We met for the interview-conversation on Telford Campus.

Belinda is a Local Authority social worker in a team working with young people with disabilities making the transition to adulthood and adults' services. I was Belinda's tutor six years ago, when she was studying to become a practice educator, and have seen her intermittently since. Her reputation among students is very good. We met for the interview-conversation on Wolverhampton Campus.

Carl has been a self-employed, independent practice educator for ten years, working across a number of university social work courses in the West Midlands. He is frequently involved in Wolverhampton's social work course and I meet him regularly in practice education meetings. When he learned about the research, he offered to be interviewed and I extended him an invitation. We met for the interview-conversation on Wolverhampton Campus.

Eleanor is a manager in Local Authority children's services where she is an on-site practice educator. She also works as an independent off-site practice educator. She had expressed concerns earlier in the year about a placement and had been dissatisfied with the response. I wanted to interview Eleanor because of her extensive experience, but was unsure she would accept the invitation. When she did, I became anxious about how it would go. We met for the interview-conversation on Telford Campus.

Fiona is a social worker in a private fostering agency and has been a practice educator for five years. I was her tutor while she was qualifying as a practice educator, though we had not met subsequently. On meeting, I got a sense that relations between us were warm and that Fiona was interested, amused even, to meet me in the role of student researcher. Fiona was on standby to respond to an ongoing crisis at work when we met for the interview-conversation on Walsall Campus.

Collecting the stories

Structuring interviews refers to the level of preparation for the order and content of questions, or interrogatory comments, made beforehand by the researcher, and to the control they exercise over these during the interview (Wengraf, 2001). I undertook semi-structured interviews, deciding against attempting the 'single question inducing narrative' (SQuIN) approach (Wengraf, 2001), because I was aware from my reading that some people tend not to tell stories (Strawson, 2004; Gadsby, 2017), or tend not to tell them without concrete prompts to do so ("What happened? What happened next?") (Bauer, 1996). Given that I was to conduct small scale research, I wanted to reduce the risk of not successfully eliciting stories, and therefore chose a semi-structured interview design so that I could adapt interview conversation to accommodate prompts. I have referred to the interviews throughout as 'interview-conversations' in order to convey this interactional aspect of the research, and to acknowledge what I have described elsewhere as the mutual- or co-construction of stories with participants.

I began interview-conversations with an open invitation: *I'm interested in hearing about your experiences of being a practice educator. Could we start by talking about that?* I prepared a topic guide of broad prompts and ongoing probes with which to follow-up their responses: *Can you tell me about your favourite/worst experience of being a practice educator? Can you tell me a little more about….?* (Appendix 4).

The following is an example of a specific prompt to tell a story:

> "You said it can be difficult working in the off-site model. Is there a specific incident you had in mind?"

During interviews, I adopted a one-sided conversational style (for example, limited turn-taking) to maintain my role as an interested listener to, but not teller of, stories.

I avoided 'why' questions because these may be perceived as threatening and they tend to elicit explanations rather than experiences Savin-Baden and van Niekerk, 2007). I also avoided challenging or cross examining storytellers' descriptions, because this runs counter to the goal of eliciting their interpretation of their experience (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000).

The interview process

Interviews were arranged at times and places to suit the participants.

At the beginning of interviews, I gave participants another copy of the information sheets (Appendix 1) and followed my briefing routine (Appendix 5).

When continuation was confirmed and consent forms signed, the recording of interview-conversations began. None of them required pausing for any reason, though I had let participants know that this was possible. I had advised participants that the interview-conversations would last about an hour. Four of them lasted between 60-90 minutes, though I gave each participant an opportunity to end the interview-conversation once the hour was up. Once conversation was ended and recording ceased, I concluded the interviews with reference to a prepared debrief (Appendix 5). On three occasions, the debrief was interrupted by participants having further recollections about experiences they had referred to in the interview-conversations. This resulted in the recorder being turned back on with their permission, in order to capture these augmentations within the research.

Transcription and initial analysis (see Appendices 6 and 7 for examples)

I transcribed the recorded interviews which, although time-consuming, enabled me to engage with each interview as I stopped to make notes of memories and thoughts during the slow process of producing a transcript (Wengraf, 2001). It also enabled me to listen attentively to make decisions about where spoken sentences began and ended, and how to represent emphasis, pauses, laughter, non-verbal utterances, gestures and environmental interruptions (for example, a squeaky table). Because of its 'stop – start' nature, once I had finished transcribing an interview, I listened to it again without interruption.

First transcripts were verbatim as I heard them from the recording, a version described as “version zero” by Wengraf (2001, p.213). I made some ‘cleaning up’ decisions in later versions, as I pondered further on where to put the commas and full stops that do not occur in speech (see Appendix 6(i) for an extract of transcription). I removed the use of ‘uh’ from the transcript of the participant who used it unconsciously as a comma rather than to denote thought or hesitation. In this respect, the process of transcription is an early layer of interpretation (Wengraf, 2001).

After transcribing the six interview-conversations, I began “a purposeful search for stories” (Blix, Hamran and Normann, 2013, p.268) within each transcript. I used the Labovian-style story structure and McCormack’s (2004) framework of associated narrative processes (argumentation, augmentation, description and theorization) as my guide for the identification of stories (see Appendix 6(ii) for an illustration of initial story identification). Nonetheless, boundaries between stories and their surrounding text were not always easily demarcated, and I shared the experiences of Riessman (2008) and Blix, Hamran and Normann, (2013) of crafting, as much as finding, stories. The identification of stories was an iterative and creative process rather than a mechanical one. A specific example of this is deciding whether or not to weave text constituting augmentation (McCormack, 2004) into a story as told. I decided against this, but did remove from some stories material that I decided constituted a digression. For example, Angela began to tell me a story about a failing student, but digressed a long way from her story while remembering another incident. Having concluded the incident she asked me,

“What was the question?” and, having been reminded, she returned to and completed her original story. In my transcription of that story, I removed her digression.

In analysing the stories, Frank’s (2010) questions for dialogical narrative analysis were used (see Appendix 7 for an example of initial story analysis). Dialogical narrative analysis does not follow a step-by-step prescriptive procedure but shares with literary criticism the skills of “slower and more attentive reading”, or ‘close reading’, (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2008 p.9; Salmon and Riessman, 2008) which support the crafting of research. The close reading was of stories illuminating who practice educators are, stories of their shared experiences, rivalries and conflicts. Close reading and re-reading generate analytic thought that moves field texts (version zero transcript), through interim texts (re/presentation of stories) to become a research text (thesis), in which storylines and their meanings are interpreted (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Choosing stories for inclusion in the thesis

The stories presented in this thesis are my retellings of practice educators’ stories, combining précis, paraphrasing and quotation. I refer to these as my re/presentations of their stories. Dialogical narrative analysis makes a commitment to keeping stories whole (Frank, 2010). Choosing those for focussed attention is time-consuming. A guiding principle is to ensure that

the choices facilitate thinking with stories and not simply about them (Frank, 2010). The process of choosing the stories is not systematic, and Frank (2010) suggests that the choice is made by the researcher on the basis of what has been learned throughout the research process, and what cries out to be written because it moves current thinking and has the potential to enhance practice. Being mindful of the concept of dialogue within an ecology of the stories, I selected for re/presentation in this thesis stories with shared themes or concerns that, during analysis, settled (sometimes uneasily) within three clusters. Firstly, those cohabiting comfortably, offering insight into common endeavour or purpose. Secondly, those clashing and vying for dominance, offering insight into the contradictions between practice educators. Thirdly, those in which practice educators contend with others in the landscape of practice education. I have chosen these stories because they have enlivened my senses, that is, “renewed and rejuvenated my felt awareness of the world” of social work practice education (Abram, 1997, p.265) and they have enabled me to understand practice educators’ experiences and to address the research questions. The selection of the stories has been influenced by my knowledge of this field, and by the insistence of some stories’ appeals to be heard (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009; Frank, 2010). The final choice arose from what came together from the iterative process of writing and re-writing a coherent narrative for the thesis. I came to this research with over thirty years of involvement in social work practice education, and these stories have animated me and given me new insights.

In summary, although my analysis, interpretation and choice of stories (data) presented in this thesis was an iterative and creative process, it was not random. I broadly adhered to the following sequence, described by Frank (2010, p.72) as an heuristic guide rather than procedural guidelines.

1. Each interview was transcribed, creating a first layer of interpretation as necessary decisions were made to convert speech into text (see Appendix 6(i)).
2. The elements of Labovian-style story structure and McCormack's (2004) framework of narrative phenomena were used to identify stories within each transcript (see Appendix 6(ii)).
3. Over forty stories were identified and each was labelled according to which practice educator told that story. For example, Angela was the first practice educator interviewed and her third story would be labelled PE1S3.
4. I devised a template for the initial analysis of each story (see Appendix 7) and, using Frank's (2010) questions for dialogical narrative analysis, I began to identify interpretation of stories that clustered around a topic or theme.
5. While recognising that individual stories, depending on content and interpretation, could belong in more than one cluster, the iterative analysis and interpretation process resolved into the three clusters presented in this thesis – stories of commonality, contradiction and contention.
6. Having created an interpretive framework within which to re/present the stories, the final act was to choose which stories to include in the thesis.

Chapter Four: Re/Presenting Selected Stories

In this chapter I re/present stories selected because they offer fresh insights into practice education, insights that will be discussed in the next chapter. The stories selected explore points of commonality, contradiction and contention.

Any retelling of a story involves editing in order to tell it in a different context. Although I have committed to keeping stories whole, this has given rise to a number of dilemmas. Firstly, they cannot be kept whole in the tellers' own words if the requirement governing word count is to be met. I have taken the salient direct speech of story tellers, presenting this *in italics,* and placed this within my précised versions of the stories. I have not used inverted commas because I have not always quoted storytellers exactly, deleting digression and repetition. Secondly, stories have the capacity to be about more than one thing, and therefore they frequently wanted be in more than one place at once. Again, this is unhelpful for word count compliance. I have placed each story within one of the three parts of this chapter, but they all clamour to be somewhere else.

As stated, the chapter is set out in three parts, each part addressing a cluster of stories; stories of common experience, stories of contradiction and stories of contention. My choice of which story to re/present first in each cluster does not denote a preference for the content or message of that story. After the re/presentation of a story or stories I have written a commentary, or exposition, of my thoughts about the story or stories. This is followed by a section headed

'thinking with stories', by which I mean (following Frank, 2010, p.152) that I have placed stories in dialogue with each other for their meanings to be explored further. Concentration on a story's internal meaning carries the threat of being caught up in that story, such that a monologic, one-sided, interpretation is given. This is mitigated by thinking with stories. Like a shuttle, I have fabricated this chapter from warp threads of whole stories and weft threads that reach across to connect with other stories. I recognise that selecting other stories, or gathering different weft threads to weave with, would have created a different narrative. I have chosen stories that I believe to be interesting and have enabled the research questions to be addressed.

PART ONE

Stories of commonality that confirm collective experience

I begin with a consideration of stories addressing two shared story-lines. The first focusses on practice educators helping students learn, and the second on the difficulty of failing students. These are stories of shared or common experiences. Such stories bring people together as they recognize themselves in each other's experiences, while leaving space enough for the distinctive events and plots of individuals' stories to be told. Stories that unite people, bringing them together through their capacity to produce and reproduce shared experiences, are regarded as collective narratives (Caddick, Phoenix and Smith, 2015). Stories of helping students learn were told in response to a query

about what being a practice educator meant to participants, and stories of working with failing students were told in response to being asked about their worst experiences.

Helping students become social workers

I begin with Fiona's story of helping a student become a social worker. All the stories of helping students learn followed a similar pattern. This, with its corresponding Labovian story structure element, was as follows:

a) the practice educator commented on what they found good in being a practice educator (abstract),
b) recalled a specific student (orientation),
c) identified some learning with which the student had difficulty (complication),
d) described what strategies were used to help the student (resolution), indicated a successful outcome (result), and
e) summed up (evaluation).

Fiona's story: Being that connecting person

> *Being a practice educator is about making students passionate about our profession. It's about making connections with the University, with what*

theory they're reading; teaching them how to look at things from different angles, looking at what we're doing, why we're doing it and how it's going to help. That's what practice educators do – they are a connecting person, connecting jigsaw pieces.

Fiona recalled,

There was a student who lacked confidence in what she knew, a mature student with loads of experiences in her previous jobs, but who couldn't see the value of how that connected to what she was doing now.

To develop the student's confidence, Fiona identified skills she had already developed in her previous employment, and linked this to social work, saying:

You're good at relationship building. If you can build relationships in social work, and get a good stable base, all the other things you can work out.

In supervision Fiona used questions to help the student understand her existing skills.

How did you get to know that person? What do you say? How did they feel? Once you've made the relationship and you know how they feel, you can push things a little harder.

Fiona's initial hope that building the student's confidence would be enough to help her was not realised. The student made a good relationship with a foster carer, but still lacked the confidence to raise concerns with her about her childcare.

Fiona commented to me that learning to challenge foster carers is…

a big thing. When you first get into practice it's a big thing that doing the hard stuff. It's all very nice doing the nice stuff; building relationships.

Continuing her story she says:

I was saying, 'Well actually, if you've built up a good relationship, then you talk about being open and honest, and give bad news.

Fiona set up 'mirroring' observations so that the student watched her talking with a foster carer about needing to improve her childcare; and then she

watched the student doing likewise. Fiona concluded that the student was able *to give the bad news because I gave her the confidence to challenge.*

Commentary

Facilitating learning

Fiona's story illustrates practice educators' work. Her jigsaw metaphor illustrates her understanding of practice education. For Fiona, practice educators make connections for students between university and the workplace, between theory and practice. Practice educators help students construct their practice. In order to be effective Fiona gets to know her student, her previous work and transferable skills. She knows the practice of the placement agency and the work the student needs to learn to perform. Her understanding of learning theory is implied within her account of identifying a learning need, connecting it to existing experiential knowledge and skill, allocating the kind of work that will help her student learn, prompting reflection through questioning, modelling good practice, observing her student's practice and giving feedback. Overall, even within a short story, there is much that resonates with existing literature. This includes the use of diagnostic assessment (Beverley and Worsley, 2007), the allocation of suitable work and relevant practice experiences (McNay, Clarke and Lovelock, 2009; Cleak, Roulston and Vreugdenhil, 2016) and a variety of methods for facilitating practice learning, including supervision, reflection, discussion, observation and

feedback, (Lefevre, 2005; Davys and Beddoe, 2009; Brodie and Williams, 2013; Cleak, Roulston and Vreugdenhil, 2016; Zuchowski, 2016; Vassos, Harms and Rose, 2018).

Facilitating learning for the "hard stuff" of practice

As a practice educator facilitating connection between theory and practice, Fiona is shaping an understanding of a practice theory (that is, relationship-based practice) that fits with the work of ensuring children are looked after in compliance with regulatory standards, which the student needs to learn. Social work is practiced in the mid-space between public ills and private troubles, a potentially difficult space to negotiate (Barnes and Hugman, 2002, Thompson, 2009). Challenging foster carers' childcare is difficult because it occurs in a context of concern for children's welfare, which raises anxiety about children's removal and its consequences. What the student is learning, in Fiona's words, is the hard stuff of social work. To help her student learn, Fiona made a connection between espoused relationship-based practice, which she described as "nice", and its practical use as a precondition for difficult conversations in the fulfilment of statutory safeguarding practices. For Fiona, the forming of good, trusting relationships is a prerequisite for being able to push conversations a little harder. There is an echo here with Higgins (2014; 2015), who has argued that practice educators are inculcated into a narrow, statutory paradigm of social work into which they acculturate students. Within his preferred broad conception of social work, he describes relationship based practice as a method

for egalitarian, emancipatory engagement with service users for the transformation of society (Higgins, 2015). From this perspective Fiona's story could be interpreted as resonant with debates about division between academic and practice curricula as she subverts an emancipatory approach for regulatory purposes (Taylor and Bogo, 2014; Higgins, 2014; 2015; Bellinger, Ford and Moran, 2016). Alternatively, Hollinrake (2019) draws attention to the client-worker relationship as the only medium through which any social work happens, irrespective of whether this is pursuant to statutory duties, therapeutic interventions or emancipatory endeavours. My interpretation of this aspect of Fiona's story is that she is emphasizing that social work through this medium is hard, that learning it can be hard, and that performing it is not always nice.

Thinking with stories

As already stated, each practice educator's story of helping a student become a social worker followed the same narrative template. The stories work to reinforce that the storytellers are competent educators in, from and for practice, and because each story addresses difficult practice, they indirectly portray the practice educators as skilled practitioners.

Each practice educator located the cause of students' difficulty with learning within students' personal attributes. Angela's student had trouble asking parents about their parenting because, *being childless*, she lacked confidence in her knowledge of child development and child care. To help her learn, Angela

devised a child development quiz, not to test her knowledge but to improve her confidence by enabling her to realise how much she knew. Angela also described to the on-site supervisor the kind of work the student needed to be allocated. She completed her strategy by observing the student, giving her feedback and then observing her again.

Belinda's *very timid student who had physical disabilities*, had difficulty asking intimate questions in the assessment of personal care needs. Eleanor's *male* student had trouble preparing to tell a mother that her child was being taken into care. Belinda and Eleanor both used role plays to help their students. Belinda provided her student with multiple opportunities to ask the same intimate questions repeatedly, in a series of role plays with different colleagues. Eleanor role-played the specific mother so her student could rehearse responding to her different reactions to being told that her child was being taken into care.

Fiona's story resonates with Brodie's and Williams's (2013) observation that, for practice educators, honesty in their relationships with students means being honest about the realities of social work. In Fiona's words, all of these practice educators are teaching the reality, the "hard stuff" of social work. Asking about childcare in the context of concern for children's welfare is difficult because it raises anxiety about children's removal. Asking adults about their ability to look after themselves is difficult because it invokes concern about loss of autonomy and independence. Telling a mother that her child is being removed is difficult enough, but more so considering Eleanor's desire that her student did so *in a*

way that she was upset, but accepted that it was the right decision. The student's task is not simply to give the information, but to give it persuasively. Service users' perspectives are absent from these stories, though it is known from existing research that service users can experience as coercive practice that social workers perceive to be cooperative (Davidson and Campbell, 2007). Neither service users nor students had significant space to breathe in these stories, which were being told from the practice educators' perspective about their own work. Nonetheless, Eleanor concluded her story by saying that she and her student critically discussed the ethics of his task at length.

The fit between story-telling and story content

What Fiona calls 'the hard stuff' of social work, van Nijnatten and Suoninen (2014) call delicate work, that is, work that may become sensitive, embarrassing and upsetting (p.137). In a mirroring of content and style, Eleanor and Belinda tell their stories using the same strategies used for negotiating delicacy. These strategies are described as indirectness of expression, expressive caution and deviation from straightforward, immediate, explicit and unambiguous expression (van Nijnatten and Suoninen, 2014). Eleanor's description of her student's task as needing *to tell a young woman that he could not continue to support her to continue to look after that baby* exemplifies indirectness and deviation from straightforward, explicit expression. Belinda's story also enacts the negotiation of delicacy.

Belinda: She could understand what she needed to do, it's just she lacked the confidence to do it. Um. [Pause] Do you want me to be specific in what it was?

Me: Thank-you.

Belinda: Um. For her it was very difficult to ask anything personal. In social work assessments you [pause] um [pause], you have to ask personal questions. So it was about her [pause] erm [pause] um [pause]. She could [pause]. She found it extremely difficult, especially with men, to ask about personal care.

These stories identify both the difficulties students have learning, and the difficult nature of the practice to be learned. Practice educators reveal themselves to be *educators* by helping students learn, and as *practice* educators by enabling students to learn the hard work of social work, including the emotional labour of their role in the mid-space between private and public spheres. Telling these stories as explanations of what being a practice educator means to them confirms earlier research that practice educators derive satisfaction from their educative role in practice (Develin and Matthews, 2008; Moriarty et al, 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011).

Stories of failing students

Angela summed up the desire of the collective narrative of helping students learn in the statement, *practice educators all want happy endings for all their students.* For Angela there are three kinds of 'happy endings'; students who pass and become social workers, students who pass but choose not to become social workers, and students who do not pass but transfer to other courses of study. The alternative to these forms of happiness, is the "agony" of failing students. My question about practice educators' worst experiences invoked a unifying, collective narrative of failing students, an experience known to be difficult for practice educators (Finch, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013; Finch and Poletti, 2014). Eleanor, Fiona and Carl responded by telling me they had not failed students. Belinda refers to a potentially failing student, a story I will come to later. Only Angela told a story of a student whom she failed.

Angela's story: You're prolonging the agony

> *The student didn't listen. She would visit a family and only talk with one person. We tried giving her very specific instruction, but even when told what to do, she would do something different, something she thought she could do, like finances, which wasn't the purpose of the visit. I called in the second opinion practice educator. I asked, 'Isn't there something we can do because it's her dream to become a social worker?' I thought it would be nicest if she transferred to the BA, or repeated a year. But the second opinion asked, 'Do you think even after that year she would have*

the skills?' And I thought, 'No'. It was for the best to fail her, otherwise you're prolonging the agony.

Commentary

Angela's story confirms a unifying narrative that failing students is emotionally costly (Brandon and Davies, 1979; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch, 2010; Finch, Schaub and Dalrymple, 2014). The emotional impact on Angela in the story is attributable to dramatic tension between her desire for a happy ending and her dread of being cast as a destroyer of dreams. This resembles tension identified in the literature between the desire to give something back to the profession by supporting the development of the next generation of social workers (generativity), and gatekeeping (Evans, 1999; Basnett and Sheffield, 2010). Role strain between facilitating learning and assessing learning, between being an enabler and examiner, is also discussed in the literature (Yorke, 2005; Finch and Poletti, 2014). However, in Angela's story, it is the failing of a student, rather than assessment per se, that is emotionally charged. Angela's experience resonates with the collective 'guilt' narrative identified by Finch (2010) in her study of practice educators' experiences of failing students. Finch (2010) takes 'guilt' to mean feeling bad about hurting someone, and quotes participant Peter, who also struggled with ending a student's dream. Likewise, Angela's agonizing was not about the assessment decision itself because she was confident the student could not pass. Her agonizing was over the impact of that on the student, an agonizing which emotionally impacted on herself. Hence

there is interpretive openness in her story about whose agony is being foreshortened. Failing the student before full completion of placement days relieves the student of efforts considered futile, but also means Angela's agonizing over the student's unhappy ending is not prolonged.

Working with different assessment regimes

Angela prefaced her story with the comment that the hardship of working with failing students is exacerbated by the hardship of working with different universities' assessment systems. Some universities facilitate a second opinion practice educator system to consider failing students who are assessed as being unable to pass the placement before completion of the requisite number of placement days. Other universities require the full number of days to run their course. Angela prefers the former system, finding the latter difficult when it has become impossible to allocate work to a student.

No other practice educators told stories of having failed students and therefore there are no other stories in this collection to think with. However, before moving on I want to comment on a distinction drawn by practice educators in this research between having failed a student, and having a student who did not pass. With the exception of Angela, the practice educators in this study did not perceive themselves as having a failed a student. Nonetheless, it became apparent later on in interview-conversations that some had worked with students who either left their placements or were counselled out of social work

on the basis of practice educators' assessments of their practice. Practice educators' stories of these experiences, which I consider later, were not strongly emotionally charged, and practice educators did not experience these students as students whom they had failed. Failing a student meant reaching an end point, and writing a final assessment containing a recommendation to fail the student.

I have considered above stories that form a collective narrative of practice educators helping students become, or struggle with denying students to become, social workers. They cast themselves as educators, and tell stories of performing their role well in order to confirm this narrative identity. On the one hand this is perhaps unsurprising, but on the other its recognition is important. In Eleanor's words they are:

> *Mentoring someone from not being a social worker to becoming a social worker through a structured process, drawing out of them their knowledge and skills, and not telling them what to do.*

The work of stories in part one has been to unify practice educators, bringing them together in a collective narrative of being educators. The stories in part two, exploring how to be a good practice educator, begin revealing differences and rivalries between practice educators.

PART TWO

Stories of contradiction and rivalry between practice educators

I begin the exploration of rivalry and contradiction in the stories of practice educators by re/presenting Belinda's story of her experience with a struggling student. In the commentary I have interpreted her story as an attempt to make sense of the question: 'how do poorly performing students reach final placements'? A thread running through her story is the need to perform the role properly, and her consideration of this is pertinent to the answer she finds to the question. However, other practice educators' stories resist her conclusions, revealing the rivalries and differences between them. These are considered in the 'thinking with stories' section.

In presenting Belinda's story as pivotal I am not promoting her attitudes and actions as exemplary. Belinda told a continuous story containing themes to which other practice educators referred or alluded and therefore I have clustered other stories around hers.

My re-presentation of Belinda's story brings together experiences she had with the same *'potentially failing'* student, to which she returned several times. I have included some of my queries and comments so that sense can be made of the story's progression.

Belinda's story: We're gatekeepers - you have to do it properly

Belinda began by commenting that being a practice educator required a lot of work, and even more so if the student was potentially failing. Recalling a specific student she said it was *a huge learning curve* for her and:

> *very surprising that he reached his final placement with his values not intact, wanting to sit in the background letting other people do things for him. Wouldn't take the initiative. Wouldn't take responsibility. Expecting just to observe and to pass.*

Belinda described failing him on his first practice assessment early in the placement. When he got angry about that she told him that failing the assessment provided him with an opportunity to learn from his mistakes, and assured him there was plenty of time for further assessments to be made. She also described the amount of work it took to support him, including additional work at home, preparing extra teaching sessions for him. The story seemed to come to a hurried end at this point with Belinda saying:

> *He didn't really care much about the quality of his work when he arrived, but by the time he left he'd reached a level and knew how to maintain it. He passed and in his final report I did make very clear what he'd need to*

achieve during his ASYE. [Assessed and Supported Year in Employment]

In response to my query about what drove her to keep supporting his learning, she replied:

> *That's my role as a practice educator – to do my utmost*. *If he'd reached his 100dth* [final] *day and the decision was that he should still fail then that was fine, he should fail. But I need to be able to sleep at night, and I need to know I've done everything in my power to enable him to learn.*

I asked if anyone had disagreed with her and she told me that her Head of Service had wanted the student's placement terminated. This led her to tell me another episode in this story.

> *He caused a serious breach of confidentiality which went right to the Director and filtered down to the Head of Service. I was called to her office to explain how this could happen. I evidenced what I'd advised him to do and that he hadn't followed that advice. She felt he wouldn't make the grade as a social worker and wanted the placement terminated. I had many meetings with her, the tutor was there too, explaining you can't just terminate someone's placement, you need to evidence everything you've tried. I had to give assurances of what we would try in order for the placement to continue.*

The Head of Service did not change her mind about the student, but did not impose the placement's termination.

Belinda commented again about *how much work being a practice educator is if you're going to do it properly*; adding: *We're gatekeepers of the profession. You have to do it properly*.

This led to an augmentation of her story. She expressed concern that students' experiences greatly depend on the practice educator they get. Belinda illustrated this with a brief story of stepping in to support the student of an off-site practice educator she believed was not doing a good enough job. Belinda expressed her preference for being an on-site practice educator, where she can get to know her students and support them daily throughout their placements. She then returned to her potentially failing student and recalled his first placement practice educator's report.

> *It had no indication whatsoever of any of the issues the student presented with, they just weren't there. It wasn't that he was ok with them, it was just… They were airbrushed out.*

Having made this comment of a specific first placement practice educator, Belinda extended it to first placement practice educators generally. She expressed a belief that they leave concerns about students unaddressed for

final placement practice educators to *mop up*, and stated that final placement practice educators like her *cannot afford to ignore things*. She asserted that other final placement practice educators agree with her about this *different mindset* between first and final placement practice educators, a mindset that explained for Belinda how poor students reach final placements. In Belinda's narrative, the concern is not that practice educators fail to fail students, but that first placement practice educators fail to facilitate students' learning.

Commentary

Belinda's story is open to an interpretation that she had failed to fail her student, because of a conflict of values (Bogo *et al*., 2007), or tension between the educator-facilitator and educator-assessor role (Finch and Taylor, 2013) or because of not wanting to fail the student (Finch, Schaub and Dalrymple, 2014). However, during the dispassionate discipline of listening again to the story, transcribing it and re-reading it, I began to appreciate the ways in which it was dissimilar to the failing to fail narrative. For example, Belinda was not afraid to fail the student on his practice assessment, nor did she lack the courage to have a difficult conversation with him about his poor practice. She understood and implemented university assessment processes, and did not avoid hassle, but could be argued to have embraced it as she sought to persuade her manager to allow the placement to continue. As the story resisted being interpreted as a failing to fail narrative, so I began to read it as a story of

Belinda's learning. The story remains open to multiple interpretations, but, following Frank (2010), I have sought for it a meaning its teller could give.

Belinda's repeated reference to her experience as a learning curve made me wonder what it was she had learned. Her use of language ('surprise', 'challenge', 'realisation') suggested that working with this student was an epiphany for her, (Savin-Baden and van Niekerk, 2007). It became a revelatory experience leading her to make sense of the troubling dilemma of how poorly performing students reach final placements. It also reinforced to her how much work is involved in being a practice educator if it is going to be done *properly*. The reason Belinda gave for needing to do it properly is that practice educators are '*gatekeepers*', a political role associated with upholding performance standards for the protection of the profession and the public (Evans, 1999; Cross *et al*., 2006). In giving her reason Belinda indicated awareness of the need to balance different interests in her educator-facilitator and educator-assessor role. While doing her work properly involved for her doing her *utmost* to support the student's learning, Belinda was also aware of her wider professional accountabilities.

My interpretation of Belinda's story turned on her reference to practice educators having to do their work 'properly', and on her remembrance of the first placement practice educator's report. Positioning these as pivotal enabled me to perceive their interpretive force spreading throughout the story. I believe Belinda's statement that *you can't afford to ignore things* revealed her opinion

that the first placement practice educator did ignore them, and that the student was ill-served by him. Her earlier declaration that she had clearly recorded the student's developmental needs in her final report, signalled that Belinda had done her work properly, preparing the way for an indictment of the first placement practice educator. There is an artfulness in her storytelling that then blurred the boundary between indictment of a particular practice educator and generalised criticism of first placement practice educators, in whose poor practice she found an explanation for how poor students reach final placements. This resonates with nurse mentors' poor opinion of their students' previous mentors (Cassidy, 2013).

Belinda also expressed a preference for the on-site model of practice education, in which practice educators are with their students throughout the placement. There is potentially an entanglement of this with her indictment of first placement practice educators, who are often off-site (Cleak, Roulston and Vreugdenhil, 2016; Zuchowski, 2016). I did not follow this up in the interview-conversation and therefore this remains supposition.

In essence, for Belinda doing it properly as a practice educator meant keeping going to the end and protecting students from foreclosure of their placements; being on-site with students; doing the utmost to support them; ensuring their learning needs are identified, addressed and assessed and not left to someone else to mop up. I found her story to be persuasively told and easy to get caught up in while thinking *about* it in isolation. Here thinking *with* stories came into its

own. Stories open portals to other stories (Frank, 2010, p.152) instigating dialogue and opening up critical discussion. Belinda's depiction of ideal practice education is resisted in other practice educators' stories, and I now consider these differences.

Thinking with stories

In this section I consider stories rivalling or reinforcing Belinda's views. I begin with a story resisting Belinda's indictment of first placement practice educators. I then consider a story contradicting her view that practice education is done properly when it is done to the utmost. Next I consider the contribution of stories reinforcing and resisting her privileging of the on-site model. I conclude with a story offering an alternative perspective to that of advocating for the interests of students who have made a serious mistake.

Resisting indictment: Eleanor's story - I counselled her out

Having said she had been *lucky* in not having had to fail anyone, Eleanor recalled a student whom she had *counselled out* of social work. Eleanor had passed the student at the end of her first placement, but doubted that the student could progress further. She identified so many learning needs for the following year in the student's final report that the student decided *this* [social work] *isn't for me*. Eleanor stated:

> *Telling a student they have more learning needs than somebody else is not difficult. You need to explain it, and they have to decide what to do with that. If they've met this year's criteria, but there's a big gap to the next, that's what you have to say.*

Unlike the practice educator indicted by Belinda, Eleanor has not ignored, or *airbrushed out*, the student's weaknesses. Eleanor has had what Finch (2017) describes as a 'courageous conversation', which initially may have caused hurt or discomfort, but nevertheless has been a catalyst for change. There is an honesty in Eleanor's conversation that bridges being honest both about the realities of social work, the student's performance and anticipated progress (Brodie and Williams, 2013). Like Belinda, Eleanor detailed the student's developmental needs in her final report. Nonetheless, had Eleanor's student not decided to leave the course, the final placement practice educator would have inherited this catalogue of learning needs. Such a practice educator may have concluded that Eleanor had left these to be mopped up in the final placement. (Indeed, the manager/assessor of Belinda's potentially failing student may have concluded likewise). These stories connect with longstanding debates about progression (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; TCSW, 2012; Stone, 2016). Cassidy (2013) also drew attention to the idea that practice educators inherit and bequeath students in a continuum of learning and assessment that, while it has recognised progression points, is also perceived as continuous. Fiona commented: *None of us are ever the done deal. We are always learning, always being assessed.* Eleanor's story offers an alternative explanation for

how students unable to perform well in a final placement reach that placement. Her story reveals the difficulty of deciding whether a student has 'reached their level'; a phrase used to mean that a student has legitimately passed *this* placement, even if unlikely to pass the next. Inheriting at the next level a student who reached their capacity for development at the previous level fuels the 'mopping up' indictment, even when the assessment has been responsibly, not negligently, undertaken. It becomes a matter of perspective. A first placement practice educator sees a student who has passed. A final placement practice educator, seeing a student incapable of progressing, wonders how they reached a final placement. I discuss this further later.

Resisting doing the utmost: Angela's story – I wouldn't try so hard again

Both Angela and Belinda prize the amount of effort they give to supporting their students. However, after making it clear that *no student of mine has failed for lack of effort on my part,* Angela told a story of an experience that had changed her attitude and behaviour about how much support to give.

Angela explained that she and the on-site supervisor had done everything they could to enable a first placement student to '*scrape through'*. Unusually, Angela was practice educator for this student in her final placement too. Unfortunately the student was *unable to up her game* in the next placement. At a placement meeting between student, Angela, on-site supervisor and tutor, Angela's reasons for why the student could not pass were explained and explored

(another ‘courageous conversation’ (Finch, 2017)). The student left the placement and was supported to transfer to another degree course. Angela concluded:

> *Had we not tried so hard, she would have failed the first placement. I was left thinking, ‘If we did it again, would we try so hard? Was it fair on her?’ And the answer would be, ‘No, I wouldn’t. No, it’s not fair’.*

Stories reveal that what is good can also be dangerous (Frank, 2010). While Belinda and Angela both assert that supporting students is good practice, Angela believes there is danger in supporting students too much. Her story dovetails with her ideas that agony ought not to be prolonged, and chimes with Belinda’s criticism of first placement practice educators, though not because of negligent support but because of excessive support. Angela’s story has resonance with Eleanor’s concern to counsel students who are able to meet the standard for the placement they are on, but whose capacity to progress is in doubt.

Resisting and reinforcing the privileging of being on-site

These stories illustrate the rivalry between practice educators about what constitutes a good way of being a practice educator. In Frank’s (2010) terms the stories perform the work of illustrating moral complexity because what is good

to some is dangerous to others. While Fiona shared Belinda's opinion that it is preferable to be on-site with students, Carl disagreed. I begin with Carl.

Carl's story: This is better than having an on-site practice educator

Although Carl is not the only off-site practice educator in this study, he is the only one who explicitly stated that the off-site model is better than the on-site model. He invoked the student voice to support him:

> *The down-side for the student when the practice educator is with them is what happens if you fall out with them. A student asked me at the start of a placement, 'How can you assess me if you're not seeing me working every day, if you're not understanding how my mind is working?' As the placement developed he said, 'Actually this is better than having an on-site practice educator because there's two people, not just one, and I can bounce ideas off two different people to see if I'm heading in the right direction'.*

Carl argued that the off-site model is better because it requires a third person, an on-site supervisor, to be involved. This third person gives the student access to different perspectives on practice. This is reflected in Hazel's (2016) discussion about being "on the outside looking in" (chapter title). Hazel is also an independent, off-site practice educator. She too argues that it is important for

students to experience a diversity of views. She believes that distance from placements enables her to perceive how social work is changing, and she reflects on this with students (Hazel, 2016). Although Eleanor does not explicitly express a preference for either model, she did comment that being off-site helped her develop a critical perspective on practice that she could discuss with students.

Carl also stated his belief that too much power is invested in an on-site practice educator. He believed it to be *a very powerful position, because you're making all the decisions*. He argued that having an on-site supervisor protects the student by diffusing power between them.

Carl's voice, while alone in this study, is important. Fiona, meanwhile, reinforced Belinda's views.

Fiona's story – working off-site is challenging

Fiona and Belinda are frequently on-site practice educators of final year students in statutory agencies. However, they sometimes act as off-site practice educators but do not enjoy it. Fiona stated:

> *The last placement I did was off-site. On-site I know the policies, I know the procedures, I know the details of the students' work. Going in as off-*

site was challenging because I didn't know those details. And then working with a practice supervisor who does know - that was difficult.

Fiona disliked the separation of roles between herself and the on-site supervisor and disliked not knowing the detail of the student's work. She felt disadvantaged by not knowing the policy and procedure of the placement. Belinda and Fiona both expressed the view that the on-site model is better for students because practice educators have better control over workload allocation, and can support and protect students day to day.

Resisting privileging students' interests: Carl's story – You have to go with that

A final way in which I imagined other practice educators' stories to be in dialogue with Belinda's was in relation to advocating for the interests of students who had made serious mistakes. Belinda had signalled her understanding that her role is a gatekeeping one, and so did not down play the severity of her student's error. Beverley and Worsley (2007) set an exercise inviting practice educators to read vignettes and decide which mistakes they regard as redeemable, and which irredeemable. I recalled this as I positioned another story of Carl's alongside Belinda's. Carl too had experienced a student who made a serious mistake. This student's placement was terminated by the team manager. Carl told me:

> *The student was in a child protection team and she put children at risk through her practice. I asked the supervising manager, 'If this was a member of your staff, what would happen to them?' She said, 'They'd be suspended, and I don't want the student here anymore'. And you have to go with that. There are some irredeemable mistakes.*

At face value Belinda's advocacy on the part of her student, when faced with a manager who wanted the placement terminated, is in contrast to Carl's apparent acquiescence in a similar situation. Belinda used her agency (will to act) in a way that Carl appeared not to. Yet their differences can be accounted for by the different stories they are cast into. By this I mean that, weighed in a balance of harms, it may be that Carl's student's mistake was irredeemable, while Belinda's was not. However, there are also other factors in play. Their location as practice educators may have unwittingly influenced their decisions. As an on-site practice educator, Belinda's student would remain with her on placement. As an off-site practice educator, Carl was not available to take responsibility for the day-to-day supervision of a struggling student, a responsibility known to burden teams in which such students are placed (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Moriarty et al, 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Domakin, 2015). Carl might therefore have deferred to the judgement of an on-site supervising manager who would have been accountable for the student's work. Carl may also have been influenced by accountability to public safety and the reputation of a placement agency, while Belinda may have been influenced by accountability to the student and his professional development, in a context in which she believed she could take firm oversight of his work.

Belinda had declared an allegiance in telling her manager: *my loyalty lies with the university*. Finch (2010), in her analysis of stories of students who made serious mistakes, refers to the paradoxical responses of practice educators who want to ensure students have every opportunity for professional development and also want to protect the public. Carl's and Belinda's stories illustrate this paradox in their alternative courses of action. Diverse accountabilities and influences are not determinants, they are different ways of weighing factors in the balance. They offer different possibilities for why Carl and Belinda made different choices. Law (2004) and Bellinger, Ford and Moran (2016) refer to agency as a person's exercising of the potential available to them to act with discretion, autonomy and creativity in a given situation. I return to practice educators' agency, and the structures that enable or constrain it, in later discussion.

This part of the chapter considering stories of contradiction and rivalry began with an exploration of a story told by Belinda, explaining to her and others how poorly performing students reach final placements. Belinda's story offered insight into her views about right and wrong ways of being a practice educator. Through imagined dialogue with other practice educators' stories, I have explored some of their agreements and disagreements. Although I have concentrated on contradictions and rivalries between practice educators, there have been glimpses of their disagreements with others, for example, with managers over termination of placements. In the third part of this chapter I explore stories in which practice educators contended with others.

PART THREE

Stories of contention between practice educators and others

In addition to differences of opinion between practice educators, stories were told of their disagreements with others in the placement nexus. These stories offer insight into power relations and the boundaried nature of practice education. Belinda's disagreement with the Head of Service about the termination of her potentially failing student's placement has already been noted in part two. Belinda also had disagreements with managers about inappropriately allocating to students work that was too legally complex. I begin part three with Eleanor's disagreement with university personnel about the suitability of a placement, before exploring Fiona's, Eleanor's and Carl's stories of disagreements with on-site supervisors about assessments.

Contending with a university: Eleanor's story - It's not my role

Eleanor, working as an off-site practice educator, told me:

> *It was a new voluntary sector first placement, but the agency didn't know what they were doing. I didn't think it had enough learning opportunities for the student. I had to find better opportunities for her in other agencies*

where students were placed. I gave her a steer about some agencies to approach to offer her work. Some of the agencies were saying, 'If we hadn't got a student here we wouldn't have taken you because we'd've got no payment'. I found support from the University wasn't there. The tutor didn't visit, and the placement coordinators didn't listen or provide support. I was visiting every week to support the student and the agency. I was on the phone, emailing, finding her experiences and fitting it to the assessment. I had to support the placement and that's not my role. OK, support the student, but not the placement. I told the university that if she stayed in that agency she'd have a 70 day observation and couldn't pass.

Commentary

I noted in the literature review that practice educators generally feel there is insufficient communication with them from the university, and off-site practice educators feel that they are not taken seriously by university staff when raising concerns about a placement (Henderson, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010). Both these issues are relevant to Eleanor's experience, which portrays practice educators as evaluators of students' learning experiences. Literature addresses practice educators' role in facilitating and assessing learning, but their role as evaluators is less frequently considered. As evaluators they monitor the suitability of placements, ensuring that the learning environment and opportunities support learning for professional practice (Cross *et al*., 2006;

Domakin, 2015; Bates, 2018). Belinda's arguments with managers about the allocation of suitable work also illustrates their role in continuously evaluating the quality of learning experiences.

On a national scale, regulatory responsibility for ensuring the suitability of placements rests with education providers, through processes for the quality assurance of practice learning (QAPL). Audits are carried out to test the suitability of practice learning opportunities available in a potential placement prior to their approval. Surveys are distributed as placements finish ('*evaluation on*') in order to gather practice educators' views, although they are criticized for attending more to placement arrangements than practice learning processes (Bellinger, 2010b). Eleanor's story draws attention to practice educators' concern about the quality of a placement while a student is in it ('*evaluation in*'). This concern is addressed by Hazel (2016) who argues that it is an important aspect of her work as an off-site practice educator. Domakin (2015) and Bates (2018) also found that off-site practice educators accepted responsibility for enhancing learning opportunities in some placements. However, Eleanor places a boundary around this role. Her story portrays the difficulty of negotiating jurisdiction for (re)evaluating a placement which she believed could not offer sufficient social work learning opportunities. For Eleanor, the amount of remedial intervention she needed to give was beyond her role, but she continued with it, because she could not get a productive response from the university until saying that the student could not pass in a placement so deficient in learning and assessment opportunities.

Thinking with stories

I linked Eleanor's experience with that of Carl, who told a story of a placement he believed to be unsuitable, though for different reasons. The student had been placed in an adult social care team described by Carl as demoralised by re-structuring. He said that the placement demotivated and disillusioned the student, adversely affecting her learning. His concern mirrored students' desire to know about placement agencies' difficulties, in addition to being given information about their work (Parker, 2010). Carl gave significant support to the student, but did not involve the University. He asked rhetorically:

> *Who do you complain to? I know there are formal channels I can use to say, 'this placement isn't working'. But the reality is, and all universities are the same, they want to maintain placements and they're not going to say 'we're not going to place anyone with you'. Unless it's a really bad placement it's just not going to happen.*

Eleanor's and Carl's stories are echoed in literature highlighting the difficulties finding resolutions between a placement agency and university (Parker, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010). Guransky and Le Sueur (2012) referred to collusion, however unintentional, over inadequate placements because of placement shortages. Bellinger, Ford and Moran (2016, p.208) argue that neoliberalist pressures force the commodification of higher education such that universities have become business ventures. There is a wider narrative of the

political agenda underpinning the supply and demand of placements in which these stories are caught up. The government review of social work and social work education, which led to the reform of the social work degree, found poor placements to be a contributory factor in newly qualified social workers being unfit for practise (SWTF, 2009a). Many of these were first placements in non-statutory agencies, and subsequently statutory criteria for social work placements were introduced (TCSW 2013a). Nonetheless, Carl's story resonates with wider literature of practice educators' doubts that universities, hard pressed to find sufficient placements to meet the demand created by business-led recruitment targets, will respond to their concerns (Guransky and Le Sueur, 2012; Bellinger, Ford and Moran, 2016). Eleanor's story reinforces the doubts.

In the context of their specific situations, Carl and Eleanor gave considerable support to their students, but took different courses of action. Eleanor raised her concern: Carl believed it futile to do so. As suggested in the interpretation of earlier stories, it can be argued that Eleanor was proactive in deploying agency, while Carl was constrained by structural forces. However the stories they are cast into retain relevance. Eleanor's concern was with the type of work available in a placement agency, a concern about which it might be easier to gather evidence. Carl's concern about team culture might not be so tangibly demonstrable.

Carl's and Eleanor's experiences and expectations raise questions about the boundaries of jurisdiction in the evaluation of placements. A similar question connects Fiona's, Eleanor's and Carl's stories of contending with on-site supervisors across a jurisdiction boundary in the assessment of students. I have not re/presented a story leading into discussion with others, but have re/presented them as a cluster of shared and compared experience.

Contending with on-site *supervisors*

Fiona's story: I needed to get him on the same page

The supervisor, working with Fiona and a first placement student, made a positive assessment of the student for most of the placement before changing his mind. On an assessment document used in tripartite meetings between student, practice educator and on-site supervisor, he rated the student as 'good' where he had previously rated her as 'excellent'. Fiona asked him if he thought the student's development *had gone backwards* and reported their conversation as follows:

> *He said: No, I marked her wrong the first time.*
>
> *I said: 'Well I wrote that up and sent it you. That was the time to disagree.*
>
> *He said: But I didn't understand that.*

I said: Well if you didn't understand, we should have talked about that. If you don't understand the processes then call me, but don't let your lack of understanding effect the student's progress.

Fiona continued, saying that she thought the student was *hitting it* against first placement capability indicators and explained:

My argument with him was, 'Look at the next placement capabilities. We all accept she needs to learn more, but they're next year's goals, and we're working on this year's.

But the on-site supervisor disagreed. Fiona said:

I needed to get him on the same page, but he wasn't a social worker and he didn't get the social work side. My argument was that we're measuring her at first placement, and we accept she's got to move forwards, but this year's goals are achieved. And he didn't get that. I thought she'd done enough. For a first placement student she'd done about right and next year is a different ball game. But he didn't get that.

Fiona concluded her story by explaining that the on-site supervisor's assessment was submitted in the student's portfolio, but that she placed a note

alongside it explaining (from her perspective) the discrepancy between her assessment of the student and his.

Whereas Fiona experienced a practice educator who changed his mind, Carl and Eleanor both tell stories of a mid-placement change in supervision, with the incoming on-site supervisors assessing the students' ability differently from their predecessors.

Eleanor's story: She didn't think the student should pass

Eleanor worked with a student where she thought there was *probably enough evidence to pass her*. The new, incoming on-site supervisor disagreed. Eleanor said:

> *The student was a Chinese woman living in England. Her husband was training to be a doctor and she was training to be a social worker. She was very much knowledge-based – "I need to know this and this is why I need to know it". I didn't know if this wasn't a cultural sort of thing. But the supervisor questioned it as unprofessional, and didn't think the student should pass because she was not really getting into the practice. I could see what the on-site was talking about, but I saw it as cultural.*

The views of the new supervisor provoked significant reflection in Eleanor. She convened a placement meeting between student, tutor, supervisor and herself. At that meeting the different views were heard, the tutor put forward an argument in favour of the student passing and, Eleanor stated, *that's what we went with, but the supervisor wasn't fully happy*.

Carl's story: The placement was terminated

In this story, the new on-site supervisor was also the team manager. Carl told me:

> *The supervisor left and the team manager took over supervision. She was saying, "The student doesn't work independently enough, she keeps asking questions". OK alright. I hadn't noticed it, but alright. Later on she's then saying, "This student is going out on her own and doing things without asking permission". So the student was totally confused because on the one hand she's trying to develop autonomy, and as soon as she does she's told off for doing things on her own.*

Carl described this as *no win* for the student and concluded the story by saying that the on-site supervisor/manager terminated the placement. I asked if he had played any part in that decision. He said not, and that it was the sole decision of

the on-site supervisor/manager. In speech attributed to her and delivered derisively, he said:

> *She was saying, 'I haven't got time to deal with this. I'm an important person. I've got 8 members of staff to manage. I know she's not going to be good because I've got 15 years of experience as a social worker'. You know.*

Commentary

These three stories address debate about off-site practice educators' reliance on on-site supervisors (Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010), and explore the troubles practice educators experience in their jurisdiction over students' assessment. Existing literature on relations between practice educators and on-site supervisors provides an important context for exploring these stories. On-site supervisors contribute significantly to assessment with little recognition or power to influence the final decision (Henderson, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Bates, 2018). Henderson (2010), reporting that on-site supervisors believe university tutors favour practice educators' opinions, argued that on-site supervisors are caught in an inferiority narrative that casts them as the unequal and neglected partners of practice educators and discredits their opinions. This is exacerbated if the on-site supervisor is not a qualified social worker. Zuchowski (2016) recognised the limited value practice educators give to non-qualified on-site supervisors' contributions to assessment, deeming them to lack

professional understanding of social work. Croisdale-Appleby's (2014) review of social work education raised concern about the capacity of on-site supervisors who are not social workers to understand the social work role. Henderson (2010) reported that unqualified on-site supervisors are aware of the difficulties they pose to practice educators because of their lack of understanding of professional performance criteria. Bates (2018) reported that practice educators themselves find the interpretation of multiple assessment criteria confusing, and doing this in collaboration with someone who does not share the same professional background adds a further layer of complexity.

Against this backdrop, an on-site supervisor changing their mind about their assessment during a placement, or a change in on-site supervisor during a placement, is problematic for practice educators because of the co-constructed nature of an assessment. The practice educators in these stories each resolve the difficulties in different ways.

Fiona legitimized her assessment decision through her status as a qualified social worker, discounting the on-site supervisor's opinion because he was not. In adopting this strategy Fiona challenged the on-site supervisor's claim to be competent to make an assessment. For her, his unqualified status rendered him unable to understand the performance of social work well enough to assess a student, though this was not an issue while there was no disagreement between them. From the on-site supervisor's perspective, he had adjusted his initially

inflated favourable judgement of the student, thus avoiding a pitfall of impression retention (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011).

Eleanor followed placement procedure for managing disagreement and convened a placement meeting at which different interpretations of the student's behaviour could be discussed in order to reach a decision about her progression. Eleanor welcomed the tutor as an arbiter between herself and the on-site supervisor at the meeting. Tutors as arbiters is noted in the literature (Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Finch, 2014, 2015a), and is a role in which they tend to privilege the opinions of practice educators and support arguments for passing students (Henderson, 2010; Finch, 2014).

Of additional interest in Eleanor's story was her reference to the student's ethnicity. There is an echo here with guidance to practice educators not to confuse difference with poor performance (Inner London Probation Service, 1993), but within the constraints of a narrative interview-conversation (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000) I did not explore this further with Eleanor.

Whereas Fiona exerted her authority over the on-site supervisor and Eleanor convened a meeting to collaborate in decision-making, Carl was overruled by an on-site supervisor who was also a manager. Unlike Fiona, Carl could not question the on-site supervisor's lack of qualification. Instead he presented her assessment of the student as contradictory, with potentially positive behaviour being negatively interpreted by the on-site supervisor/manager. Frank (2010)

suggests that stories not only deal with trouble, but cause it. Carl's story creates trouble for his argument that the off-site model diffuses the power invested in an on-site practice educator by sharing it with an on-site supervisor. However, he did not attribute legitimacy to the on-site supervisor/manager's opinion. His derisive delivery of her reported direct speech may indicate frustration he felt on behalf of the student. Nonetheless, she was not fated to watch from the side-lines as a student she believed to be poor, was passed by the practice educator. As a manager with the power to withdraw the placement, the on-site supervisor of Carl's student resisted her casting as a bystander.

Thinking with the stories

As off-site practice educators, Carl, Eleanor and Fiona were on the periphery of both the university and the placement workplace, needing to build their credibility across boundaries with on-site supervisors, so that their legitimacy was not undermined by doubts about their relevance and knowledge (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015). Such doubts are known to exist, expressed by on-site supervisors who believe it is not enough for practice educators to have expertise in education, and who value those practice educators who get to know the work of the agency (Henderson, 2010). Taking time to build trust with on-site supervisors is recognised by off-site practice educators as important for their effectiveness (Zuchowski, 20016), and as necessary for developing support that mitigates their isolation in times of dispute (Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010). Zuchowski (2016) also argues that good relations are needed so that off-site

practice educators can understand how the placement context impacts on the interpretation of students' behaviours during assessment. A change of on-site supervisor, as experienced by Carl and Eleanor, ruptures existing relations within the placement nexus.

In relation to assessment, Shay (2008b) argues that the social relations of being a knower (that is, who you are; for example, a holder of a qualification) become privileged over epistemic relations (that is, what you know and how you know it). In chapter one I used BASW's (2019) definition of an on-site supervisor to state that they make an important contribution to students' assessment. Thinking with these stories led me to consider how claims to competence and jurisdiction in assessment are raised and resolved between off-site practice educators and on-site supervisors. Further consideration brought the realisation that role boundaries between practice educators, on-site supervisors and tutors are engaged by these claims, along with boundaries between those who are qualified and those who are not, between managers and practice educators, between social work education providers and social work providers. During my exploration of the stories, different kinds of jurisdiction, accountabilities and claims to competence became apparent. For the consistent structuring of this chapter, my thinking about this ought to belong here. However, my thoughts about boundaries have become a substantive part of my consideration of the research questions, which I intend to address in the next chapter. To avoid duplication of content, I will sum up this chapter and take my discussion of boundaries into the next.

In this chapter, I have re/presented practice educators' stories of commonality, contradiction and contention that enable me to address the research questions. These re/presentations are my own and I appreciate that other researchers would have made different re/presentations. Nonetheless, they are rooted in the interview-conversation transcripts. They are not character studies of their tellers, but glimpses into their experiences in specific contexts. From them I am carrying forward to the next chapter a narrative of practice educators who assert their intent to be *educators* in, for and from *practice,* as they help students become social workers. Despite their shared narrative identity, rivalry is evident in their positioning of themselves as either on- or off-site, first or final practice educators. The abundance of boundaries in the landscape in which they work, increasingly apparent in their stories of disagreeing with others in the placement nexus, introduces an understanding of practice educators as boundary workers.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The stories re/presented in the previous chapter were selected for the contributions they make in addressing the research questions:

1. What do practice educators' stories tell us about who practice educators are?

2. How do practice educators hold their own in their stories, and against whom are they holding their own, that is, how do they seek to sustain their value, as individuals or a collective, in response to what threatens their worth?

3. What is at stake in their stories, that is, what is at risk, or in jeopardy, in their stories?

I developed these questions from Frank's (2010) guidance for dialogical narrative analysis. Frank (2010) believes stories have the capacity to help people make sense of and deal with their troubles. The purpose of the questioning is to generate fresh understanding of troubles in order to generate new ways to deal with them. The following discussion explores my responses to the questioning. In summary, I argue that the stories tell us that practice educators are educators, holding their own by working the boundaries in a complex practice learning landscape, and that it is their capacity to exercise agency in this landscape that is at stake.

Research question 1: What do practice educators stories tell us about who practice educators are?

The stories illustrate that practice educators are *educators*, which Domakin (2014) concluded is given insufficient attention within social work education. As noted in the literature review, there is a range of roles fulfilled by practice educators, often condensed into their roles as facilitators and assessors of learning. At times, these roles are portrayed as oppositional and a significant source of tension (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Finch and Poletti, 2014; Woods, 2015). At others, they are recognised as intertwined without inevitably being conflictual (Bogo, 2013; Stone, 2014b; Dix, 2018). The stories told here broadly supported the latter narrative, though I want to propose that there are three important intertwined roles; facilitating learning, assessing progression, and evaluating learning opportunities (Cross *et al.*, 2006). I do not refer to role performance as tightly defined, mechanistic adherence to pre-determined parameters, but rather as flexible and needing to be worked out in specific situations. Roles may be performed differently in different contexts (Slembrouck and Hall, 2014). In exploring what their stories tell us about who they are, I have paid attention to practice educators as educators by focussing on their understandings of facilitating learning, assessing progression and evaluating learning experiences.

Practice educators as educators, debating the facilitation of learning (pedagogy)

Bellinger's (2010a) assertion that practice learning requires participation in practice in a practice setting is underpinned by a pedagogy of situated learning. The basis of this pedagogy is that competence and knowledgeability are most effectively acquired in contexts where such competence and knowledge are to be performed, meaning practice is best learned in-situ (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The discussion opened up by the stories is whether or not practice educators ought to be situated in placements alongside their students. While the literature notes advantages and disadvantages between the on- and off-site models of practice education, (Lindsay and Walton, 2000; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Zuchowski, 2016; Dix, 2018), assertions that one or other is pedagogically better are not made. In research exploring practice educators' experiences, differences between the two models are observed, but the opinions of on- and off-site practice educators are rarely differentiated (Brodie and Williams, 2013; Higgins, 2014; Jasper and Field, 2016; Domakin, 2015; Wiles, 2017 and Bates, 2018). A rare differentiation is made in Edmond's (2017) discussion of direct observations of students' practice. She concludes that on-site practice educators use direct observation for formative assessment because, being with their students daily, they can make continuous, progressive observations to promote students' development, while off-site practice educators use them for summative assessment to determine whether students' practice is meeting required standards.

Practice educators in my study did express preferences for one model of practice education over the other. Their pedagogical rationale for the superiority of their preferred model drew on its espoused benefits to students and on what they valued about themselves as educators. Off-site practice educators valued the independent perspective that not being immanent within practice gave them, arguing that having distance from placements heightened their capacity to think critically about practice to the benefit of students. They also valued the wider perspective on social work given them by regular involvement in different practice settings and believed this benefitted students, because they could help them link specific practice to social work more broadly. Carl argued that this helped facilitate students' generalist social work education within specialist practice settings. He also argued that the on-site supervisors required by the off-site model, protected students by diffusing the power invested in on-site practice educators and introduced another perspective on practice that enhanced students' learning.

Whereas off-site practice educators valued generalist knowledge of social work, on-site practice educators valued their in-depth knowledge of the law, policy and practice of a specific placement, prizing it as an essential source of their credibility as educators. It was important for them that practice educators can model good practice for students and be their *first example*. They also found being on-site with students beneficial in protecting them from being mis-used to reduce the backlog of unallocated cases and from being allocated cases that were too legally complex.

A context to this rivalry narrative between on- and off-site practice educators is that those in this study who preferred to be on-site expressed that preference after temporally crossing a boundary from being on-site to becoming off-site practice educators, and not enjoying the experience. As protagonists in their stories, although they sought to assert that the on-site model is most beneficial for students, it was nonetheless apparent that the model was favourable to themselves. They valued being practitioners, and valued their hybrid identity in placements as practitioners and educators. In their stories of temporarily becoming off-site practice educators, each of them broke a thread which for them had tied their legitimacy as educators to their capability and knowledgeability as practitioners. They used their experience, and their discomfort with it, to lend credibility to their opposition to off-site practice education. They expressed their discomfort in words such as “different”, “challenging” and “difficult”. Fenton-O’Creevy, Dimitriadis and Scobie (2015) find the roots of such discomfort in a “disconfirmation of identity”, which, they suggest, is experienced by competent practitioners making a transition across a boundary to another role. With resilience, they argue, the negative emotions evoked in disconfirmation can be managed in order to complete the boundary crossing, and become competent in a new way of being. However, these practice educators were crossing into a role they narratively identify as inferior. Not only is there the potential for loss of competence, but also for loss of face. The transition to another way of being a practice educator requires a narrative identity shift if the transition is to be successful. To make a transition to an off-site way of being practice educators they would need to adopt, adapt, create and inhabit positive stories of off-site practice education.

The stories of off- and on-site practice educators are told in order to persuade themselves (since story-tellers are counted among their own audience (Crossley, 2000)) and others that one model has more merit than the other. The force of the '*either/or*', rather than '*both/and'*, between the models comes from the way each side undermines the other. In this, the practice educators are confirming Shay's (2006; 2008a) argument that people slip from their view of a model of reality to the presumption of the reality of that model. Within the practice learning landscape, these models have created two ways of being practice educators: on- and off-site. Such categorization can be a useful way to make sense of people's work and actions and can be used to clarify roles and responsibilities (Mäkitalo, 2014). However, in their stories, practice educators were not perceiving a neutral distinction, but a categorization tantamount to an 'us-them' boundary between rivals, used by each side to stake a claim for the superior pedagogy of their preferred model. Heite (2012) argues that such categorization dangerously valorizes one point of view to silence another, akin to Frank's (2010) argument that while the work of stories is to persuade, they become dangerous when they do it too well; when they are monologic and give little scope for different points of view. Nonetheless, both on- and off-site practice educators told stories of attempting to create pedagogical conditions in placements in which future social workers could flourish. In their different ways, they attempted to find spaces in which students can develop into capable practitioners. However, stories of practice are never merely descriptions because in them, storytellers consciously or unconsciously reveal their explanations (theories) (Shay, 2006; 2008a). In these stories, practice educators made sense of experience in terms of competing practices, opening up pedagogical debate about practice education.

Practice educators as educators, assessing learning and achievement (progression)

As stated in the previous chapter, a collective narrative that working with failing students is difficult and emotionally costly confirms existing research (Finch, 2010). Angela's experiences demonstrate that practice educators are cast into students' stories to play their part in happy endings or the destruction of dreams, exposing the tension between facilitating professional development and denying access to a profession (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Finch and Taylor, 2013). Nonetheless, outside such experiences, facilitating and assessing learning were mutually interdependent, as I now illustrate.

All the practice educators in this study were working with universities whose course structures included first placements of 70 days and final placements of 100 days. They all recognised the temporal structure created by these time boundaries through references to practice learning agreements (beginning), mid-point reviews (middle) and final assessment reports (end). Within this temporal structure there is directional activity (progression), creating a liminal time/space trajectory along which it is hoped that, as time passes, so will students. Practice educators used the full span of placement time for enabling and assessing learning. They assessed students from *day one* and enabled their learning to *the hundredth day* (also noted in Stone's (2014b) research). Their statements illustrate the intertwining of facilitation and assessment of learning, as well as demonstrating the use of temporality to emphasise their

work from first to last to support students. Practice educators' perceptions of their students' performance was not confined within individual placements. Belinda and Eleanor referred to their use of final reports to indicate required future learning, while Fiona recognised that students are *never the done deal* because there is always more to be learned. This assessment of students' progression between levels was expressed as troublesome in their stories.

Students' performance on placement is not intended to be static but requires progress, that is, directional activity along a time-line, or trajectory, toward the standard of capability specified for that placement level (Cross, 2016). Doel (2018) suggests that setting time boundaries around placements ignores the differing speeds at which students learn and obscures the challenge posed by needing to help students reach the same standard within the same time-scales. Students' marginal or borderline performances create dilemmas in assessment. Commenting on this in their stories, practice educators used phrases such as, 'there was probably enough evidence for a pass' (Eleanor) and 'I thought she had done enough to pass' (Fiona). Without explicitly articulating it, practice educators took account of the actual (present) performance of students, while also anticipating their potential (future) performance as they considered whether or not the student might or might not succeed at the next level. This is evident in Eleanor's story of counselling out of social work the student she believed could not pass the next placement. It is also apparent in Angela's conclusion that it is not fair to help a student get through a first placement if it only leaves them incapable of passing the next. Their stories illustrate how practice educators hold in tension assessment as both the assessment of an end product

measured against a standard, and the assessment of capacity for developmental progression (Moriarty *et al.*, 2011; Edmonds, 2017). The introduction of the Professional Capabilities Framework promotes a developmental, progressive and continuous approach to assessment (Jasper *et al.*, 2013; Stone, 2014a; 2014b; Higgins, 2016). Wiles (2017, p335) notes practice educators' use of the framework to structure students' progression, including discussing with them their "next stage of learning". Edmonds (2017) conceptualizes this assessment of the actual and the potential as the "raised stakes" between points of progression within and between placements. Stone (2016) draws attention to a space practice educators construct between the successful completion of a final placement and becoming a social worker (Stone, 2016). The stories told to me suggest that similar spaces are constructed between time-bound progression points throughout a student's trajectory as practice educators anticipated students' potential for future progression. An interpretation of their stories is that, consciously or unconsciously, they are dealing with the difficulty of requiring students to reach the same progression point at the same time by anticipating students' capacity to progress at the next level. Where a practice educator gets their evaluation (anticipation) of a student's potential right, the phenomenon is largely unnoticed. It is in getting it wrong, (when students do not make anticipated progression, as happened with Angela's student who could not *up her game*), that practice educators become vulnerable to claims that they 'fail to fail', or leave work for future practice educators to mop up. Instances of practice educators getting it wrong by failing a student who would otherwise have been a late developer would be difficult to identify, though such experiences may be internalised within the personal narratives of students who believe this has happened to them.

Practice educators' stories of working with borderline students were also stories of disagreements with managers and on-site supervisors, as they positioned the performance of the student differently across the 'pass/fail' boundary. In part, the disagreements may relate to the way different orientations to assessment (product or progression) align with different stakeholders' expectations of students (Rawles, 2012/13). Lishman (2009), Jasper *et al.* (2013) and Higgins (2016) have argued that employers want newly qualified workers to be functionally ready, whereas the profession and educators want critical thinkers capable of ongoing development in practice. In their stories, different people within the placement nexus (people with different employers, roles, and accountabilities) disagreed with their assessments. I explore this further later.

Practice educators as educators, evaluating learning opportunities (protecting)

While Eleanor's story of her difficulty getting a response from a university personnel overtly addressed concern about the quality of practice learning opportunities within a placement, there are glimpses of such concern in other stories. At face value, ensuring that students have good learning opportunities may be taken as an inseparable part of their role as facilitators of learning. The allocation of appropriate work to support learning needs is specifically noted by the practice educators, and in the literature is taken as a given within the pedagogy of experiential learning (Beverley and Worsley, 2007; Field, Jasper and Littler, 2016; Dix, 2018). However, I argue there is an evaluative aspect to this because of practice educators' awareness of compliance with placement

criteria, and with statute requiring specific functions to be carried out by qualified and registered social workers (although elements of these functions can be delegated to students). Stories of dissatisfaction with placements and argument about suitable workload allocation support Bates's (2018) report that practice educators are guided by both placement criteria (what must be provided for students' professional learning) and published assessment standards (how students need to perform) when determining learning opportunities for their students. It is this understanding of regulation that adds an evaluative aspect to the practice educators' role. In fulfilling this evaluative role, they protect students from exploitation, from demoralising and demotivating environments and from experiences insufficient to aid development toward becoming a social worker.

Practice educators as boundary workers, working the boundaries of placements

It became increasingly apparent as I interpreted their stories that practice educators work in a boundaried landscape. Their stories revealed the time boundaried nature of placements, category boundaries between on- and off-site, first and final placement practice educators, and role boundaries between facilitating, assessing and evaluating learning and learning experiences. Additionally, they revealed role boundaries with on-site supervisors, tutors, placement coordinators and managers. From this, in addition to understanding practice educators as educators, I began to understand them as boundary workers because they work, act and think at boundaries (Hart *et al.*, 2013). As

Heite (2012, p.2) argues, a boundary “classifies, categorizes, sorts, normalizes, includes and excludes, privileges and de-privileges, allocates rights and removes them”. Claims of jurisdiction, competence and authority can all be analysed as boundary work. It is as boundary workers that I believe practice educators have held their own in their stories, and I discuss this further in response to the second research question.

Research question 2: How do practice educators hold their own in their stories, and against whom?

Nzute (2017) argued that people’s troubles are threads of experience that draw their stories together. Exploring practice educators’ stories led me to consider the troubles experienced with managing boundaries to be one unifying narrative holding the stories together. In my interpretation, I argue that practice educators hold their own in their stories by being boundary workers, not just because of the location of their work but because of the mode of it. By this I mean that they devised strategies and developed skills to negotiate, test and contest boundaries in order to get their work done, leading me to conclude that practice educators not only work at boundaries, but work boundaries. The placements in which they act as practice educators are a nexus, a connecting space simultaneously located within social work practice and social work education. They are neither one nor the other, but both. Rather than a single border-line delineating the two institutions of welfare and education, there are cross-hatched lines denoting overlapping, shared space. The nature of placements as

a hybrid space creates a landscape in which boundaries between organizing regimes and practices are blurred, making them harder to work because people with different roles are subject to diverse accountabilities and claims to competence, and the different kinds of power they deploy are derived from diverse sources of authority and influence (Parker, 2010; Williams, 2011).

Boundaries are contested areas, where jurisdiction and authority can be disputed, and boundaries of jurisdiction around such practices as assessment, termination of placements, the allocation of work and the evaluation of learning opportunities seem to me to be particularly troublesome in practice educators' stories because of their ambiguity. Boundary working, as a means of articulating and maintaining a position at the intersection of organizations, systems and practices (Oliver, 2013), is the way in which practice educators hold their own position in this boundaried landscape, as I illustrate below.

For Heite (2012), boundaries are both an expression of power relations and the medium by which they are maintained. The deployment of power is an important element of my discussion of practice educators' experiences of boundary working. In the literature review, I listed French's and Raven's (1960, in Parker, 2010) typology of power used by Parker (2010) in his analysis of power relations within a placement nexus. I present an updated version of this typology here.

Table 1. Typology of Power (Raven, 2008).

Power	**Meaning**
Reward power	Capacity to offer incentive or benefits
Coercive power	Capacity to threaten or bring negative consequences
Legitimate or Position power	Authority derived from role, status, function or seniority
Expert power	Ability to use knowledge, wisdom and experience
Referent power	Being respected, admired or trusted
Information power	Knowing rules, policies, processes and procedures, and knowing how to use them

Boundary working in the collected stories

Stories re/presented in the previous chapter are discussed to explore fresh understanding of practice educators as boundary workers. My discussion includes identification of the problem underpinning disagreements, the boundaries engaged by the problem, additional factors contributing to complexity, and the strategies and skills deployed in working the boundary to resolve the problem. The discussion draws on comparisons between practice educators' approaches, with the intention of identifying effective boundary working and its impediments.

Working boundaries with on-site *supervisors - with reference to the stories: "She didn't think she should pass" [Eleanor] and "I needed to get him on the same page" [Fiona].*

Eleanor and Fiona are both challenged by on-site supervisors who disagreed with their assessment of students. In their stories, Eleanor and Fiona are off-site practice educators who assessed their students as being on track to pass their placements, but the on-site supervisors disagreed. In Eleanor's story, the challenge followed a change in on-site supervisor mid-way through the placement. In Fiona's story, the challenge came from an on-site supervisor who changed his mind about his favourable assessment of the student toward the end of the placement. The jurisdiction boundary around who makes the assessment decision about students' professional capability engages other boundaries. It engages an insider/outsider boundary between on-site supervisors and off-site practice educators, along with an 'us/them' category boundary between qualified social workers and (unqualified) social care workers. This in turn impacts on claims to competence at the role boundary between practice educators and on-site supervisors. These disputes over assessment jurisdiction are also significant to students' crossing of progression boundaries.

Within their respective roles, both practice educators and on-site supervisors have responsibility for assessing students. National guidance ascribes assessment responsibility to practice educators and tasks off-site practice

educators to work “jointly” with on-site supervisors, to whom responsibility is given to contribute to practice educators’ assessments (BASW, 2019, p.3). The importance of successful joint working is apparent from practice educators’ reliance on on-site supervisors’ day to day (experiential) knowledge of the student, though the literature points to a tendency for this to be discredited, especially if the on-site supervisors do not also have discipline [social work] knowledge (Shay, 2008b; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010). The jurisdiction boundary for assessment is further blurred by the inclusion of tutors who become relied on as arbiters in disputes between practice educators and on-site supervisors (Finch, 2014). Bellinger, Ford and Moran (2016) complain that responsibility for decision-making in practice assessment is not helped by obscuring the identity of the final arbiter. They argue that universities’ assessment regulations, implemented through formal academic assessment boards, “render invisible” (p.210) those involved in practice assessment. These additional elements add complexity to negotiating the assessment jurisdiction boundary being contested by on-site supervisors.

National guidance is interpreted and issued at a local level within education providers’ course handbooks that set out placement policies and procedures. Such documents are referred to as mediating artefacts, or boundary objects, because they provide focus and structure for collaboratively negotiating and meaningfully aligning activity across institutional and practice boundaries (Rawles, 2012/13; Hart *et al.*, 2013; Kubiak *et al*., 2015). Negotiation is necessary because absolute role definitions are not given. For example, what it means for an on-site supervisor to make a contribution to the practice

educator's assessment is not further specified. As Slembrouck and Hall (2014) argue, producing more guidance cannot solve boundary problems because roles cannot be rigidly pre-determined and need to be worked out in specific situations with reference to boundary objects. Eleanor and Fiona took different approaches to working through the boundary dispute in their specific situations.

Eleanor's working of an assessment jurisdiction boundary

Eleanor commanded various types of power (Raven, 2008). She had legitimate power in her position as the practice educator assigned responsibility for the assessment decision. As an experienced and capable practice educator, she had expert power. She had information power through her knowledge and understanding of the rules, processes and procedures of practice education and referent power as a respected practice educator. She deployed her power productively to work collaboratively and did not assert her authority to force through her own assessment of the student.

Eleanor's approach to her relationship with the on-site supervisor was constructive, which eased collaboration in the shared territory of assessment, and mitigated against its becoming disputed territory (Zuchowski, 2016; Henderson, 2010). Indicative of her constructive approach was her respect for the on-site supervisor, demonstrated in her acknowledging the legitimacy of the on-site supervisor's opinion, accepting it as a credible (albeit opposing) alternative interpretation of the student's behaviour. Eleanor observed protocol

for the resolution of disagreements in the placement nexus by convening a meeting attended by the student, on-site supervisor, tutor and herself. An interpretation of Eleanor's strategy is that she adopted an inquisitorial approach that sought to investigate different perspectives in order to reach a conclusion, rather than an adversarial approach in which opponents contest a matter with the intention that one side will win the argument. However, while consensus was sought it was not reached. The tutor was credited with the final decision, with which the on-site supervisor was described as *not fully happy*. As previously noted, the use of tutors as arbiters is recognised within the literature (Hart *et al.*, 2013; Finch, 2014), although Eleanor's apparent deferral to the tutor may have been a strategic, judicious use of her political skills of diplomacy and tact to diffuse conflict with the on-site supervisor. Such a strategy is attributed to effective boundary workers (Oliver, 2013). With the tutor as arbiter and by not directly challenging the on-site supervisor, to whom respect and recognition was shown, the on-site supervisor did not lose face with Eleanor.

Eleanor's effectiveness as a boundary worker is evident in her deployment of relational agency, using communication skills to explore and explain, rather than convince and convict. Williams (2011) describes relational agency as boundary workers' ability to influence people through diplomacy, negotiation and consensus-seeking. For Oliver (2013), the ability to build trust and respect is a prerequisite for effective use of relational agency. I would argue that Eleanor held her own in her story through her political acumen and relational agency, which were significant in her working of this boundary to reach the conclusion

she desired. Nonetheless, she did so without alienating the on-site supervisor or making it significantly harder for her to hold her own.

While Eleanor convened a meeting and acknowledged the competence and legitimacy of the on-site supervisor as a contributor to assessment, Fiona's story depicts a different approach.

Fiona's working of an assessment jurisdiction boundary

Fiona too had position power as a practice educator and as a qualified and registered social worker. In deploying her information power, she had ensured that formal processes for recording ongoing assessment in tripartite meetings throughout the placement were adhered to. A boundary object (the framework for professional capability) provided "a tangible bridge" to support the alignment of their interpretation of the student's performance (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015, p.84). However, when the on-site supervisor changed his assessment of the student's performance, Fiona did not use this boundary object to consider collaboratively with him whether a joint re-alignment of their assessment was necessary. Having sought his explanation for his changed assessment, Fiona's strategy was to convince him to abandon it and align his views with hers (*get him on the same page*). Failing to convince him, she put forward her own assessment report in the student's portfolio and submitted the on-site supervisor's assessment with a note explaining her opposition to it.

In her story, Fiona used reported speech in the form of turn-taking to portray the dispute between herself and the on-site supervisor.

> *He said: No, I marked her wrong the first time.*
>
> *I said: 'Well I wrote that up and sent it you. That was the time to disagree.*
>
> *He said: But I didn't understand that.*
>
> *I said: Well if you didn't understand, we should have talked about that. If you don't understand the processes then call me, but don't let your lack of understanding effect the student's progress.*

Juhila, Jokinen and Saario (2014) argue that reported speech can be used to construct the roles characters are cast into in a story. Fiona's reported speech constructs both the on-site supervisor's character and hers. He is portrayed as incompetent through his ignorance of the assessment process. She is portrayed as frustrated with him and indignant on the part of the student (*don't let your lack of understanding affect the student's progress*). Fiona linked his incompetence and ignorance to his inability ever to understand because he is not a social worker. Shay (2006) argues that the influence of structural power relations becomes evident when deliberations about judgements are laid bare, and that people's theories are embedded within those deliberations. Fiona's deliberations may be interpreted as her deployment of power over a disputed jurisdiction boundary and as a commentary on the involvement of (unqualified)

social care workers as on-site supervisors of social work students. Fiona staked her claim for legitimacy as an assessor on her position power as a practice educator and professionally qualified social worker. She does not convene a meeting to resolve the dispute. She does not deploy her power productively in a collaborative approach, but adopts a limiting mode of power that seeks to suppress alternative perspectives (Tew, 2011). By invoking an 'us/them' category boundary between social workers and non-social workers, Fiona adopted an adversarial approach, undermining the on-site supervisor's claims to jurisdiction in assessment and his competence to contribute to it. Her story confirms that boundary working does not necessarily open up dialogic space, but space in which powerful acts can be undertaken unilaterally when struggling for dominance (Williams, 2011; Hart *et al.,* 2013). Slembrouck and Hall (2014) draw attention to the choice of working a boundary either by reinforcing its divisiveness and capacity to exclude, or by finding ways to be inclusive and work cooperatively across a boundary. For Heite (2012), such choices are values-based. Fiona's choice can be interpreted as the oppressive exercise of power over the on-site supervisor. It can also be interpreted as adherence to demarcation essential for the preservation of social work as a profession. Fiona's story contributes to existing debate about the legitimacy of the use of non-social workers as on-site supervisors of social work students (Jasper *et al.*, 2013; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Zuchowski, 2016). Nonetheless, there is no promotion of a collaborative, cooperative approach to working the role boundary between them. Rather, Fiona asserts her authority over the on-site supervisor, already reckoned to have little recognition or power (Henderson, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010; Bates, 2018). She makes little use of boundary working strategies for maintaining constructive relationships of trust and respect, or skills

of tact or diplomacy (Williams, 2011). This is not to deny that the on-site supervisor might have been obstreperous and objectionable, just as he might have been reasonable and conscientious. In Fiona's story, he has little breathing space to perform any role other than the one into which he was cast.

The differing interests and accountabilities of parties to a placement nexus impact on the negotiation of jurisdiction boundaries. As gatekeepers, practice educators are accountable to their profession and protect the public's interests. As educators, they are accountable to the university and serve students' interests. University tutors are accountable to their profession, employer and students. On-site supervisors are accountable to their employing agency and its service users, as well as serving students' interest. Managers in placement agencies are accountable to their employer and service users, serving their interests as well as those of employees. I consider next boundary working with a manager.

Working boundaries with managers - with reference to the story: "We're gatekeepers - you have to do it properly" [Belinda].

The manager in Belinda's story did not think the student should pass the placement or continue on it. The boundaries engaged by the story are jurisdiction boundaries between manager and practice educator, placement agency and university, and hierarchical boundaries between managers and employees. Colloquially expressed, the question concerns who calls the shots

about when a poorly performing student should be removed from a placement, a concern also addressed by Angela when considering the prolonging of agony. Belinda's story reflects the complexity of negotiating jurisdiction boundaries, and multiple accountabilities, authority and influences in the practice learning landscape. Her challenge was that her senior manager, the Head of Service, wanted to terminate her student's placement because he had made a serious mistake by causing a significant personal data breach in the Local Authority.

Belinda's working of a jurisdiction boundary over the termination of a placement

Belinda is a practice educator and social worker within the team where the student was placed. There are subtly different relations between Belinda and the Head of Service across Belinda's different roles. In her role as a practice educator, the Head of Service is a manager within the agency where the student is on placement. In her role as a local authority employee, the Head of Service is her senior manager. The subtle differences never remove the hierarchical boundary between them. The legitimate power over Belinda derived from the status of being Head of Service is not diminished, but as a practice educator, Belinda has different kinds of authority and autonomy beyond the jurisdiction of the manager. These differences arise from the border between the placement agency and the university, a border which Belinda spans as a social worker and practice educator. Her strongest ally in the story is the tutor, who hails from across this border. In their different roles, Belinda, the manager and the tutor draw on diverse sources of power, influence, authority and

accountability that affect claims to jurisdiction in the decision about terminating the student's placement.

As the Head of Service in a Local Authority, the manager has an interest in protecting the public and the reputation of the agency. Staff policies and procedures for initiating disciplinary proceedings are not applicable to students, but they potentially exert influence over consideration of what is possible. An example occurs in Carl's story of the student who put children at risk. Once the on-site supervisor/manager (dual roles) brought to mind the options available had the student been an employee, those options influenced her preference for the student to be removed from that workplace. So, although they are not authoritative sources for decision-making with students, as alternative forms of managing, staff policies and procedures provide sources of influence to managers who are accountable for the protection of the public and the reputation of the placement agency.

Belinda has expert power from her understanding of practice education, information power from her knowledge of the processes and procedures for managing placements, (which she articulates persuasively), and referent power from being respected in both her roles as practitioner and educator. In her story, she deployed her power productively to safeguard the student's interests. Belinda was working the boundary with her manager to protect, though not defend, the student. Belinda did not deny the seriousness of his mistake, and she recognised that his failure to follow her guidance contributed to it. In

working the boundary, Belinda maintained her own trustworthiness as a practice educator who fulfilled her responsibilities and was not negligent in her instruction. There is implied acceptance from Belinda that her manager could stake a legitimate claim to jurisdiction over the dis/continuation of the placement because of the seriousness of the student's mistake and its impact within the Local Authority and on its reputation. Nonetheless, Belinda did not cede the case.

Having secured an ally in the tutor, Belinda's strategy at the meeting with the Head of Service was to convince her that continuing the placement, rather than terminating it, was the procedurally correct course of action. Belinda did not contest the legitimacy of the manager's point of view. Her goal was to persuade her into a different course of action. Belinda's negotiation with the manager was not about changing her interpretation of the student's behaviour, but changing her mind about denying time for remedial action to be taken. Like Eleanor, Belinda deployed boundary working strategies of tact and diplomacy (Williams, 2011), using communication and interpersonal skills in a non-hierarchical approach (Oliver, 2013) to achieve her ends. In the negotiation, Belinda rooted herself in her position as a practice educator, sought support from the university tutor and drew on university policies and procedures for managing placements. Although this resonates with descriptions of the tensions practice educators experience on the border between universities and employers (Yorke, 2005; Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Higgins, 2014), Belinda resisted being cast as a pawn in the proceedings, and demonstrated her personal agency in determining how to act. In her account of the meeting with

the manager, Belinda expounded the university policy and procedure for supporting struggling students, interpreting them as preventing the termination of a placement without having tried remedial actions. This interpretation is true, as would be an alternative interpretation that the student had made an irredeemable mistake that brought the placement agency into disrepute and risked service user safety. The latter interpretation could sanction the termination of the placement. Boundary workers are risk takers who exercise discretional use of their agency in the facilitative implementation of policy (Williams, 2011). Belinda's boundary working strategy demonstrated this. With diplomacy and tact, Belinda did not challenge the position power of the manager. Instead, she deployed her own referent, expert and information power to make a case that protected the student's interests, deconstructing him as someone who had made an irredeemable mistake to reconstruct him as someone who could learn from that mistake. She succeeded in persuading the manager to sanction the continuation of the placement. Belinda's boundary working skills were her ability to negotiate, present procedural knowledge persuasively, advocate for the student, and manage differential power relations (Hoe, 2006; Williams, 2011; Oliver, 2013).

Belinda's story draws attention to the complexity created at boundaries by multiple accountabilities and different management systems. Bellinger, Ford and Moran (2016) note that, while universities can place students, they (rightly) cannot control placements. Placement agencies are influenced by their multiple accountabilities to different stakeholders (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015) and their need to manage their organizations in accordance with their own interests (Cross *et al.*,

2006). Struggling students are known to create additional work for teams (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011) and poorly performing students may be difficult to allocate work to (as attested to by Angela). Nonetheless, in the border-country between the respective accountabilities and interests of placements and universities, Belinda expressed her agency to enhance students' interests.

Working boundaries with university personnel - with reference to the story: "It's not my role" [Eleanor].

Eleanor's working of a jurisdiction boundary over the evaluation of placements

Eleanor's story addressed the lack of response she received from university personnel to her concern that a student was on a placement with insufficient learning opportunities for becoming a social worker. The student could only observe counsellors, take notes and make phone calls. Eleanor's difficulty was that neither the tutor nor the placement coordinator would visit the placement at her request to consider the deficiencies of the placement.

The boundaries engaged by this disagreement were a boundary between practice education and placement coordination roles, and the boundaries Eleanor had to cross to find learning opportunities for the student in other placements that she believed would enable the student's professional development. The involvement of multiple institutions created further complexity

in the negotiation of boundaries, with the history of the development of non-statutory placements and extensive debate about what counts as a good social work placement potentially underpinning the different perspectives of different parties to the placement nexus (Jasper *et al.*, 2013; Domakin, 2015; Flanagan and Wilson, 2018). In essence, this debate draws on preferences for broad or narrow conceptions of social work (Higgins, 2016; 2017), and the extent to which placements should privilege pedagogy (practice *learning*) or statutory practices (practice *experience*) (Bellinger, 2010a; 2010b).

In her negotiation with other placements, Eleanor deployed her referent power as a locally well-known and respected practice educator and Local Authority team manager. While this power did not give her direct authority, it gave her significant influence. As practice educator, she also had legitimate position power in her assessment role, which ultimately gave her leverage with university personnel. Those personnel were responsible for the administration of the daily placement fees that finance placements, providing them with reward and resource power. Eleanor used her referent power to broker additional learning opportunities in other agencies. This required hard bargaining because those agencies sought payment that Eleanor did not have the power to award. However, Eleanor did persuade agencies with students already placed with them (and who were therefore in receipt of some payment) to offer additional learning opportunities to her student. Boundary workers frequently hold little or no direct authority over other stakeholders, but exercise a non-hierarchical approach based on highly developed communication and interpersonal skills to achieve their ends (Williams, 2011; Oliver, 2013). Eleanor used these skills to

deploy her relational agency and challenge the legitimate power of university personnel to endorse practice agencies as social work placements.

Eleanor's story emphasised the extent to which she needed to cross a border into University territory to get a job done. The work of finding better opportunities and supporting the agency through visits, emails and telephone calls were all work beyond the boundaries of Eleanor's role as a practice educator. Her difficulties resonated with research by Bates (2018), who noted the willingness of off-site practice educators to collaborate with other agencies to secure additional learning experiences for students. However, for Eleanor, the additional experiences were not supplementary to the placement to enhance it, but fundamentally necessary if the student were to have anything better than an observational placement.

To secure the university's recognition of her difficulties Eleanor deployed her position power as an assessor as leverage, stating that the student would fail at that placement due to insufficient opportunities for the development of professional social work practice. It is important to note that Eleanor is not directly threatening the student with failure, but using her power as an assessor to coerce (because she could not persuade) the university into responding. The boundary was being worked to safeguard the interests of the student by protecting the quality of her learning opportunities. From Eleanor's perspective, the boundary work she undertook to secure appropriate learning for the student was an unacceptable crossing into University territory. In working this boundary,

Eleanor felt compelled, on behalf of the student, to perform a role into which she was cast by the lack of responsibility taken by others for work on their side of the border. There is potential to interpret the story as a challenge to the university to move closer to more statutory placement provision, but Eleanor's frequent involvement in other non-statutory agencies without complaint balances against such an interpretation.

Summing up boundary working

The ability to use relational agency is a central skill in boundary working. In this context, agency is understood not only as a rational and cognitive ability, but also as an emotional (of the emotions) and embodied ability to exercise creativity, discretion and autonomy in order to act (Law, 2004). Interpersonal relationships based on respect, trust and integrity are a precondition for effective boundary working (Oliver, 2013). Relationship building skills are prized because they create climates within which differences can be understood and efforts mobilised to cooperate and collaborate (Bellinger, Ford and Moran, 2016). Practice educators need relational agency because the landscape of practice education and its boundaries are contoured with complexity that creates ambiguity and tension, and blurs boundaries, making them harder to work (Williams, 2011).

To sum up practice educators' strategies for effective boundary working, I have adapted a table devised by Williams (2011, p.28) with reference to the ideas of Hoe (2006), Heite (2012), and Oliver (2013).

Table 2. Practice educators' boundary working skills and strategies.

Practice educators' boundary working skills and strategies			
Connect systems	**Mediate among people**	**Advocate for students**	**Protect the public & the profession**
Manage multiple accountabilities, authorities and influences Manage overlapping claims to jurisdiction Secure/Broker learning resources Enhance the enabling capacities of boundaries, and diminish their constraints	Negotiate to understand problems and find solutions Understand different parties' interests Secure allies & build coalitions Be politically and personally tactful and diplomatic Listen empathetically and be a sounding board	Argue persuasively Develop effective personal relationships Build trust Understand and argue within the regulatory frameworks Use relational agency	Safeguard service users Uphold the profession's standards (regulation) Understand boundaries of professionalism (values)
Generic boundary working skills: ability to build effective working relationships, communicate well, use discretion, autonomy and creativity, and exercise agency			
Generic boundary working attributes: respect, openness, integrity, motivation, commitment and persistence.			

Constraints to effective boundary working

So far, I have considered stories in this research illustrating how practice educators hold their own in this landscape by boundary working. However, boundaries between accountabilities and interests become more complex when parties hold multiple roles: for example, practice educators may also be university employees, on-site supervisors may also be placement agency managers, and may or may not be qualified and registered social workers. Carl's stories of working boundaries with on-site supervisors who are also managers offer different insights into practice educators' encounters at boundaries. Such on-site supervisor/managers might reasonably be presumed to want to balance their accountabilities to students with accountabilities to staff, employment agency and service users. In this context, Carl's agreement (*you have to go with that*) with the on-site supervisor/manager who terminated the placement of the student who placed children at risk can be interpreted as collaboration on the boundary of assessment jurisdiction in order to protect the public, the profession and the team from poor practice.

Nonetheless, Carl twice experienced on-site supervisor/managers terminating students' placements because of disagreements about assessment. In both stories, the on-site supervisor/managers were social workers concerned about the poor quality of students' performances. Carl found their assessments to be as problematic as they found his. I only re/presented one of these stories (*she terminated the placement*) in the previous chapter and it is the basis of

discussion here. In the story, he described the on-site supervisor/manager's assessment as having put the student in a '*no win*' situation. He said that the student was assessed by her as not being independent enough, but when the student exercised independence she claimed the student failed to understand safe practice. The on-site supervisor/manager's response to Carl's disagreement with her assessment was to terminate the student's placement. Carl used reported speech attributed to the on-site supervisor/manager to express his opinion of her rationale: *I haven't got time for this ... I know she's not going to be good because I've got fifteen years of experience as a social worker*. He spoke her words derisively. Juhila, Jokinen and Saario (2014) argue that reported speech can be effectively and vividly used in stories to make the people quoted sound ridiculous. This seemed to be his intent here, perhaps provoked by his frustration on behalf of the student here.

From Carl's perspective, his actions may be interpreted as an attempt to protect the interests of the student. From the on-site supervisor/manager's perspective, she may have been attempting to protect the interests of the team she managed. The amount of work required to support a struggling student has already been attested to by Angela and Belinda, and this is confirmed in the literature (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Plenty and Gower, 2013; Domakin, 2015). An important boundary working strategy is the ability to understand and work with different interests (Williams, 2011). It is not possible from the story to finalize interpretation of Carl's boundary working. Interpretation remains open to Carl's having failed to engage with the on-site supervisor/manager's concerns sufficiently to allay them, or to his having had the misfortune to work with an on-

site supervisor/manager who wanted only to support students already able to contribute to the work of the agency without making demands on team members' time or other resources.

The different combinations of power, authority and influence are a significant factor at jurisdiction boundaries between practice educators and other members of the placement nexus holding multiple roles. In Carl's story, the on-site supervisor was able to switch to her management role to wield position and resource power to terminate the placement of a student she believed should not pass. Carl's position power as the practice educator is over-ruled by the resource power of the manager, and his jurisdiction over practice assessment is usurped by her jurisdiction over the provision of the placement. The story depicts an on-site supervisor/manager's dramatic resistance to being cast into an inferiority narrative as an unequal and neglected partner in the placement nexus (Henderson, 2010).

Carl does not refer to attempts to find consensus, nor to thinking of convening a placement meeting, nor to the use of boundary objects to help align assessment judgements and consequent actions. His story does not convey adoption of diplomacy or tact, or deployment of relational agency to resolve disagreement. Carl stated that he had no role in the decision to terminate his student's placement. There is scope to interpret Carl as quiescent in a story into which the on-site supervisor/manager was cast as the villain of the piece and to whom he and the student fell victim. Nonetheless, the effectiveness in boundary

working is constrained if prerequisites of trust and respect are denied by those across the border (Oliver, 2013).

An important aspect of boundary working is consideration of the extent to which people are able, or feel able, to use their power. Raven (2008) argues that personality characteristics, such as anxiety about and attitude toward the difficulty faced, influence the ways in which people choose, or choose not to use power. Parker (2010) and Sherwin (2016) both refer to the significance of a person's locus of control in their deployment of power, with those having a predominantly external locus of control being more likely to attempt to use their power. Yet, agency is a concept bonded with structure (Simpson and Connor, 2011) and the complexity of structural forces in practice education make its boundaries harder to work. The complexity of practice education evident in its multiple stakeholders with competing goals, poorly aligned requirements and unstable governance create a structural context in which consensus is difficult to find (Simpson and Murr, 2014). An alternative interpretation of Carl's story is that he was, or felt, disempowered by structural impediments. Such an interpretation is echoed in the disillusionment he expressed about the likelihood of being listened to in his story of supporting a student in a dysfunctional team. His story did not imply that he alone would not be listened to, but that no-one in that situation would be listened to because neoliberalism encourages university social work departments to operate within business models that tolerate poor placements. Eleanor's lack of response from university personnel to her concerns about a placement with insufficient learning opportunities supports his

implication, as does literature (Guransky and Le Sueur, 2012; Bellinger, Ford and Moran, 2016).

As is evident from literature (Parker, 2010) and the stories in this study, placements can be divisive places. Dominant narratives considered in the literature review portray competing voices contesting the nature of placements, curriculum content and assessment standards and people with diverse interests contending over assessment decisions in the placement nexus (Taylor and Bogo, 2014; Simpson and Murr, 2014; Higgins, 2016; Bellinger, Ford and Moran, 2016; Wiles, 2017). In relation to boundaries, practice educators in these narratives are varyingly positioned as isolated and lonely (Shapton, 2006/7; Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011); or as caught in the cross-fire, like piggy in the middle (Bogo *et al.*, 2007; Rowe, 2008); or as entrenched on the side of practice (Higgins, 2014). I have argued that through their stories, practice educators are articulating a position as boundary workers in relation to pedagogy, practice and policy, attempting to hold their own in the push and pull of positioning themselves while being positioned by others. Understanding practice educators as boundary workers offers insight into how they deploy their relational agency to hold their own within and between the institutional and social structures of a placement nexus. The capacity of practice educators to use relational agency effectively within the impediments created by structural forces is addressed in my discussion of what is at stake in their stories.

Research question 3: What is at stake in their stories?

The question of what is at stake in the stories concerns what is in jeopardy and what heightens that jeopardy. I argue here that it is practice educators' capacity to exercise their relational agency that is at stake in their stories, and that it is the macro level structural forces in which their micro level stories are caught up that jeopardise it.

As already argued, boundary working requires relational agency in order to interact effectively with structural forces whose complexity creates the ambiguity and tensions that make them harder to work. Structural impediments on the macro level, as discussed in the literature review, arise from the instability of governance, poor alignment of end goals and weak curriculum coherence. Complexity arises from multiple institutions and stakeholders operating at multiple levels of scale with multiple sources of power, authority and influence, all changing over time, creating transient and fluid structures (Cashman *et al.,* 2015; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015b). National policies related to both social work and education affect placements, though the interests of these may not converge (Bellinger, Ford and Moran, 2016). The multiplicity of national stakeholders, (government, professional bodies, regulatory bodies, education institutes, service user groups, employers) has led to multiple sources of authority, as each produces its own requirements and guidance, creating flawed boundary objects because they are not in unison (Ixer, 2013). These stakeholders respond to different influences (public opinion, economy,

political ideology, media), just as they each exert different influences on social work education. At a local level, placements are organized through partnership arrangements that are not uniform across institutions and result in practice educators being subject to several organizing regimes, as Angela was in her experience of different universities' practice assessment regulations.

Practice educators' individual micro stories are caught up in these macro level tensions that have the potential to jeopardise the exercise of practice educators' agency. It is the recognition of their work and their capacity to create collaborative boundary working relationships amid the complexity of powerful, transient and fluid structures that I believe could protect practice educators' agency. These stories cry out for the recognition of practice educators' work and for a collaborative arena in which to perform it.

Recognition for the work of practice educators

Many practice educators work for employers who rarely value their role (Schaub and Dalrymple, 2011; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014), and act for universities who rarely recognise their contribution (Henderson, 2010; Domakin, 2015; Bellinger, Ford and Moran, 2016). In the literature, two related narratives of practice educators can be discerned, each corresponding with reality in its own way. In one, practice educators are "pivotal" (Woods, 2015) and "integral" to social work education (Plenty and Gower, 2013); the "crux" of the placement nexus (Parker, 2010) and the "beating heart" of practice learning (Beverley and Worsley, 2007).

In the second, their work is described as “hidden” (Jasper, 2014) and “rendered invisible” (Bellinger, Ford and Moran, 2016), with particular comment that their role as educators is given insufficient attention (Domakin, 2014).

Jasper (2014) offers two explanations for the lack of recognition of practice educators. The first is that an undue focus on their assessment role gives an incomplete picture of their work. The second is that the centrality of supervision in social work creates a presumption that their role is predominantly accounted for by supervising the student, leading to a lack of appreciation of their pedagogical knowledge and skills. For me, the gap between the two narratives is also explained by the lack of recognition for practice educators as stakeholders in practice education at a macro, structural level, and not just as deliverers of it. An example of this lack of recognition is apparent in the following paragraph of a government review of social work education.

> The process for the involvement of stakeholders such as practice educators and others associated with the organisation and delivery of practice education and supervision is less clear, other than in their direct delivery roles. There is strong evidence that HEIs consider such colleagues as valuable contributors to the quality of the educational experience of students, and would look to their further the contribution being made in an individual capacity rather than in any group representation. I think this is entirely reasonable approach to take, as they are not deliberately chosen as a homogeneous group and already

> they are seen to have ready access to make additional input to the course design and delivery if they so choose (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, p.44).

The conclusion that it is right to work with practice educators in an individual capacity is, for me, ill-judged. Although their stories showed their contradictions and divisions across various category boundaries, they also showed their collective and common interests in the education of students to become social workers. While they may not be homogenous, they could be encouraged to be a heterogeneous collective. However, their limited access to group representation within universities and in the workplace contributes to the perpetuation of their hiddenness and invisibility. The development of their capacity to act with discretion, creativity and autonomy in the micro level of a placement nexus is potentially impaired at a meso level by limited access to forums where they can develop their confidence to exercise agency.

Recognising the work of practice educators is not simply a matter of offering plaudits and praise. Genuine recognition requires the redistribution of power to ensure their participation as stakeholders in decision-making (Marston and Macdonald, 2012). Bellinger's, Ford's and Moran's (2016) analysis of the negative impact of neoliberal policy on both higher education and social work practice, and their appeal to educators in the academy and in practice to act together with discretion "within and between those two flawed structures" (p.212), is compelling. However, the influence of disputes between different

national stakeholders about the nature and purpose of social work and the telos of social work education is palpable (Taylor and Bogo, 2014; Higgins, 2014; Simpson and Murr, 2014), and the capacity of people within those two institutions to act together collaboratively is also at stake in these stories.

Capacity for collaborative working in the placement nexus

Although the relationship between universities and placement providing employers is often referred to as a partnership, Guransky and Le Sueur (2012) have argued that the use of this term is inauthentic due to power imbalances, and Cook (2016) has argued that its use is illusory, creating a false perception of togetherness in the pursuit of common interests. Cook (2016) also argues that it is an umbrella term, embracing different relationships based on different organizational structures and processes. She differentiates between democratic partnerships, in which parties assert their own perspectives and interests to force a way forward, and participatory partnerships, in which parties willingly engaged with the perspectives and interests of others to find a way through collaboratively. The former is akin to Parker's (2010) depiction of the placement nexus, and the latter akin to his call "to synthesize from the interplay of various force fields (HE requirements, professional standards, social work values and human rights) a more inclusive and supportive system for determining actions" (Parker, 2010, p.996). The contribution being made from my interpretative narrative of practice educators as workers in a boundaried landscape, is that a more inclusive and supportive system could be developed out of the

conceptualisation of boundary working, and its skills and strategies. Williams (2011) describes collaborative arenas as complex and challenging because:

> "They bring together a diverse set of people from divergent sectoral and organization backgrounds under the umbrella of a common purpose. However, this often masks materially different views and opinions of fundamental issues: problem definition and solution; value and belief systems; culture, language and ways of working – all framed against a background of confusion over roles, accountabilities and responsibilities" (Williams, 2011 pp.30-31).

This description resonates with the interpretation of practice educators' stories of their boundary working with on-site supervisors, managers and university personnel. Although I argue that the capacity to exercise agency is at stake in practice educators' stories, requiring recognition that involves a redistribution of power that would enable their participation in decision-making as stakeholders, I do not argue that practice educators are powerless. They have all deployed different kinds of power in their boundary working strategies. Nonetheless, the development of the placement nexus as a collaborative arena is also at stake in these stories. The development of such a culture requires a sea change from the struggling and dominating described by Parker (2010) to a striving for cooperation and consensus-seeking. A movement away from the use of power to exploit self-interest and suppress awareness of different perspectives is required. The lack of shared hierarchy in a boundaried space offers the

potential for boundary working as a productive use of power through dialogue that counteracts the use of power to dominate. This research offers the possibility to recognise boundaries as a space in which to negotiate, collaborate and cooperate.

The stories told in this collection reveal practice educators' struggle for recognition and the ways in which relational agency can be deployed to work effectively across boundaries in a placement nexus influenced by complex structural relations. Wrenn and Wrenn (2009, p.258) describe the high stakes of practice education as the capacity to enable students to learn to perform as professional social workers. Bogo (2015) argues that the wellbeing of society is at stake in social work practice education because good practice learning experiences lead to the development of good social workers, and good social workers enhance the lives of citizens and society's wellbeing. In Angela's words: *You work with one student, knowing they go on to do so much.* For these reasons, support to develop productive deployment of relational agency in this landscape is called for. I address ways in which such support could be developed in recommendations in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this research has been to explore practice educators' experiences of being practice educators, in order to gain fresh insight into their perception of and positioning in social work education. I learned from the practice educators participating in the pilot study that they spoke widely about their experiences, even when being asked about assessment. In response, I widened the focus of my research to explore matters of interest or concern to them. This led me to favour narrative inquiry as a research design and method because stories are considered to be an ideal means of transmitting and therefore studying experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008; Frank, 2010). I began interview-conversations with open queries (for example, about favourite and worst experiences), following these up with prompts to help explore their experiences further. I have gathered practice educators' experiences in story form, and used Frank's (2010) dialogical narrative analysis to question what the stories have told me about who practice educators are, how they hold their own in social work education, and what appears to be at stake in their world. In summary, I have argued that practice educators are committed to being educators, facilitating and assessing learning and evaluating learning experiences and that they are boundary workers who, through their boundary working, hold their own in the landscape of practice education. Their stories offer insight into their boundary working skills and strategies, which are

sometimes deployed collaboratively and cooperatively, and at other times oppressively and collusively. What is at stake in their stories is the capacity to exercise their relational agency and to develop and enhance boundary working skills and strategies with all parties in a placement nexus, with a view to promoting collaborative and cooperative spaces.

There is much in the research that I have enjoyed. For example, the way practice educators used ‘delicacy’ (van Nijnatten, and Suoninen, 2014) to tell stories of teaching delicate work, about which I commented in the Re/Presentation of Stories chapter; my improved appreciation of the many ways, above and beyond supervision and assessment, in which practice educators advocate for, protect and support the interests of students; and my increased understanding of the multiple interpretations a single story can generate. In this concluding chapter, I set out the contribution to knowledge made by this research. I also evaluate the research and acknowledge its limitations, identify its implications and applications, and make recommendations for practice and further study.

Contribution to knowledge

Confirming existing knowledge

My study confirms existing research, including the emotional cost of working with marginal or failing students (Finch, 2010; 2017), the difficulties of judging whether students have successfully negotiated thresholds between progression points (Stone, 2014b; 2016), the understanding that potential performance as well as actual performance is taken into account in assessment (Stone, 2016; Edmonds, 2017), the reliance of off-site practice educators on on-site supervisors (Henderson, 2010; Hubbard and Kitchen, 2010), and the competing interests of different parties within the placement nexus (Parker, 2010; Higgins, 2014; 2015).

Building on existing knowledge

The advantages and disadvantages of on- and off-site models of practice education are known within the literature (Dix, 2018). Of new interest is that, grounded in their experience as either on- or off-site practice educators, they are not neutral about these models. They express preferences, even though they are divided about which model is pedagogically superior. Practice educators can make a significant contribution to theoretical debate about facilitating practice learning, though this would require a shift away from them

being perceived as predominantly deliverers of education to being recognised as contributors to course and curriculum development.

Practice assessment is recognised as complex within the literature (Simpson and Murr, 2014), and the inclusion of potential with actual performance is recognised in the assessment of capability (Stone, 2014b; Wiles, 2017). Further insight has been gained from consideration of whether a student can be given too much support, from discussion of how practice educators weigh up whether a student has 'done enough' to pass, and from the way in which feedback is used to dissuade students from continuing their social work education. While this insight has refreshed my own teaching, appreciation of practice educators' contribution to understanding progression through time-bound placements requires better recognition of their status as partners in practice education.

The research has also offered insight into the practice educator role of evaluating students' learning experiences to ensure that they meet placement criteria; that is, that they are sufficient for enabling development of capability, without being exploitative, for example, being too legally complex.

Taking the above together, a key learning point from this research is that practice educators' pedagogical views are rarely heard because the landscape in which they work rarely brings them together as a collective to listen to them, and underestimates the contribution they can make as stakeholders.

Creating new knowledge

I consider the most significant contribution of this research to be the insight into the boundaried nature of the landscape in which practice educators work, and an understanding of them as boundary workers (Williams, 2011; Oliver, 2013). Neither of these ideas is new, but they are brought together here as a new way of understanding the experience of practice educators. As stated in the methodology chapter, a purpose of dialogical narrative analysis is to find alternative ways of conceptualizing difficulties in order to generate new strategies to deal with them (Frank, 2010). I believe I have achieved this. Parker's (2010) description of placements as settings in which diverse people with diverse types of power struggle for dominance is one that captured my imagination. Although my own experience led me to agree with it, I regretted that it was so, conceiving the acts of struggling and dominating negatively as expressions of the use of limiting modes of power to oppress and collude (Tew, 2011). Existing literature articulating the impact on social work education of disputes between stakeholders about the nature and purpose of social work (Taylor and Bogo, 2014; Simpson and Murr, 2014; Higgins, 2016; 2017), along with my conceptualisation of placements as a border country between social work practice and social work education, initially seemed to me to reinforce Parker's (2010) description. My reading of Oliver's (2013) defining of boundary working as work between systems with superficially complementary goals that inevitably creates conflict requiring mediation, negotiation and strategy, opened up a narrative of practice educators as boundary workers. Some of the stories offer examples of practice educators proactively and effectively being boundary

workers. Some stories, in which practice educators expressed futility in attempting to exercise their agency, demonstrate the push-back of structural impediments against efforts to build collaboration and cooperation. Other stories, in which practice educators use agency oppressively, demonstrate the danger of not developing respect and trust (which are prerequisites for a culture of cross-border collaboration (Oliver, 2013)) with different parties in the placement nexus.

A new understanding of social work practice educators as boundary workers also makes a contribution to wider professional education, for example, nursing and teaching, because it has resonance for any educators working at boundaries between institutions, stakeholders and governing bodies.

Evaluation and limitations of the research

I was pleased and relieved that practice educators were so willing to talk about their experiences, and I am grateful to them. My broad aim to explore their perception of and positioning in social work education was only possible through the time they gave to talk with me. I was also pleased to receive from some that they too benefited from the experience, because opportunities to share and make sense of their experiences are rare.

Undertaking this research has been beneficial to me personally. I believed I knew a lot about social work practice education when I started, and that I was able to see different points of view. While these beliefs were true, I have stretched my capacity in both and developed in knowledge and self-awareness. I have been interested to discover and re-think opinions (taken for granted assumptions) I did not know I held, for example, some bias in favour of on-site practice education. I believe that this previously unconscious bias underpins one of my regrets. I regret not being adept enough to ask practice educators about their views of on- and off-site practice education in a way that did not constitute challenge or cross-examination. I regret this because at times, I got a sense that on-site, final placement practice educators in local authorities were dissatisfied with their students' previous experiences of off-site practice educators supporting non-statutory placements. However, in the absence of data, I am unable to disentangle whether this is about non-statutory placements, independent practice educators or my own previous bias.

Despite the above acknowledgement, there are certain values within the research that I hope to have upheld:

Credibility: Frank (2010) argued that a story's particular truth is not in its correspondence with reality, but in its sketching of a reality which is itself worthy of analysis. I have sought credibility by being truthful to the storytellers, giving rich description in my re/presentation of stories that closely follows their telling. I have also sought credibility by giving meanings to the stories that can resonate

both with participants and the wider practice education community. Credibility is demonstrated too in the coherence of the reasoning, which is putting forward a rationally defensible argument rather than a rationally irrefutable one.

Confirmability: My interpretation and analysis are grounded in the stories told. Other analysts may have given different interpretations, but I present mine transparently through the commentary and discussion. I have presented data in different forums for feedback, including annual research performance reviews, supervision, conference papers and a mock viva. The latter prompted reflection. I was questioned on the personalities of the practice educators. Afterwards, I read through the way I had re/presented their stories. Any re-telling, mine included, cannot avoid depiction of character. The power of stories is that people get caught up in them; in the characters, events, decisions and consequences. I acknowledge that there were times when I have been caught up in them and have found it difficult to reflexively examine stories from tellers' perspectives. For example, initially listening to Belinda's story of her struggling student, I could only hear its resonance with the 'failing to fail' narrative, until I explored it from the perspective of her description of the experience as a "learning curve". For a while I perceived passivity in Carl's stories, until I recognised his extensive student support and his theorizing of the impact of structural forces. It is a strength of stories that they enliven the senses (Abram, 1997) and stimulate imagination (Frank, 2010).

Transferability: The statement is often made by small scale, qualitative researchers that a limitation of their research is its lack of generalizability. I acknowledge that this is the case here too. The level of interpretation within this thesis, however credible, is such that it cannot be reliable. Nonetheless, there is still scope for its inferences to be credible and transferable to other contexts. Such contexts are not confined to social work education and the findings from this research could inform wider professional education. The description of the study, its context and coherent exploration of interpretation, allow for others to assess the applicability to different settings.

My chosen method of dialogical narrative analysis for analysing stories raised some difficulties. I did not find it easy to identify stories. Some followed the Labovian structure and were easily located. However, in conversation, participants began a story, then broke off to tell another before returning to complete a story. Sometimes they did not complete stories. Sometimes they described their work without storying their experience. In the analysis, I retained my commitment to identify Labovian-style stories, while allowing for other narrative phenomena to be included (McCormack, 2009). I did this because I was persuaded that stories need to be recognizable as such and that, while others may research story fragments, partial tellings and refusals to tell, I am sufficiently literal to want to work with something recognizable.

I also found it difficult to decide how the stories should be clustered. Through supervision and the iterative process of writing and re-writing, I settled on the

three clusters of commonality, contradiction and contention. Nonetheless, my early drafts included too many stories. I had fallen in love with them all. I made my final selection by choosing stories that gave different perspectives on debates from the five storytellers.

There are voices that have not been referred to in this research. Service users and carers are largely absent from practice educators' stories, except as the generalized characters in stories of students' learning. Although students make regular appearances in the stories, their perspectives are rarely given. This thesis is focussed on practice educators' stories and therefore, absences from their stories are also absences from this thesis.

Implications and applications of the research

The implications of the research have already influenced my own practice. In my teaching of practice education, I have written discussion starters about on- and off-site models of practice education in order to tease out and explore pre-existing attitudes among peers. I have planned new teaching on evaluation that takes account of practice educators as evaluators of learning and assessment opportunities during the placement as well as afterwards. I have also added the skills and aptitudes of boundary workers to my existing teaching material, devised exercises to explore 'what happens next' according to policy and procedure when disagreements arise, and devised a role play of a practice assessment panel convened to resolve a disputed assessment outcome. In the

review of the MA in Social Work, I have consulted practice educators as a separate stakeholder group about the curriculum. I am adding principles for boundary working to the policy and procedure for managing disagreements on placement. I am mindful of Slembrouck's and Hall's (2014, p.78) statement that boundary problems cannot be solved by producing more guidance. However, little harm and some good may come of trying to set a tone for resolving difficulties that is not solely procedural.

As a result of the research, my aim is to influence university tutors and practice educators to create a culture for boundary working, an aim that is applicable in other fields of professional education. The development of a narrative of practice education in which practice educators are boundary workers in a border country landscape can contribute to a cultural shift in the perception and positioning of practice educators. At the end of her interview-conversation, Belinda told me about a sign in the church porch at her daughter's wedding. It read, 'Welcome. Whether bride's or groom's family, please take a seat not a side'. I have recalled this a number of times while writing this thesis. A change in perception that acknowledges boundaries rather than rifts within practice education would be beneficial. In part, this could be achieved by explicit acknowledgement of the structural and systemic forces that position actors within the landscape, and that this positioning need not inevitably lead to the taking of sides. Such a change of perception is premised on the prerequisites of trust between parties and respect for the legitimacy of their differing interests. It involves understanding practice educators as those in a position to span the boundaries, working with tact and diplomacy to negotiate overlapping claims of

jurisdiction, accountability and loyalty within practice and education. Guidance to practice educators could include:

- Understand the interests and accountabilities influencing your opinions and decisions.
- Understand the jurisdiction you and others have in this area of practice and seek to negotiate rather than contest the jurisdiction.
- Understand the interests and accountability of others.
- Argue your position persuasively, asserting your claim to competence and jurisdiction with tact, diplomacy and authority.

I acknowledge that this might still be construed as ‘struggling for dominance’ (Parker, 2010). Whether or not it was his intention, the language used by Parker offers an image of a struggle to dominate, to oppress. The struggle I envisage is a struggle to find ways in which to cooperate amid differences, and to deploy diffused power productively. An implication from the research is that this is important in order for good decisions to be made about students. As discussed, the placement nexus creates a complex interplay between agency and structure, as the constraints of structures impact on the capacity of practice educators to exercise their discretion and autonomy (Radnor, 2002). Within the placement nexus, the agency (creativity, discretion, autonomy (Law, 2004)) of practice educators as decision-makers needs to be developed and supported by managers in placement agencies and by university personnel. This is not to deny the need for checks and balances, and appeals and complaints

procedures. Nevertheless, a cultural shift toward the recognition of practice educators' agency requires a significant change in thinking at a structural level.

Recommendations for practice and future study

In the same way that I have made modest claims for the transferable qualities of this interpretivist research, so I make realistic recommendations; that is, recommendations that I believe have a chance of being implemented.

My recommendations for practice are:

1. Recognise practice educators as a stakeholder group in their own right and encourage their development as contributors to practice education.
    a. Establish regular practice educator meetings. Activities could include:
        i. Action learning sets and solution-circles to develop boundary working capacities.
        ii. Mentoring practice educators working with failing students.
        iii. Discussion of pedagogy, including merits of on- and off-site practice education.
        iv. Collective discussion and action as a practice educator special interest group.

The meetings could be established either from (i) an ‘Expression of Interest’ I have submitted to bid for West Midlands Teaching Partnership funding to develop a Practice Educator Community of Practice or (ii) enhancement of existing quarterly practice educator continuing professional development workshops at Wolverhampton University.

b. Consult practice educators about qualifying and post-qualifying curricula development and provision of social work education.
c. Include practice educator representation in course management.

2. Introduce boundary working into the practice educator course curriculum by:
    a. Facilitating learning about relational agency in the context of diffused power relations.
    b. Facilitating development and deployment of relational agency skills.

3. Introduce the concept of boundary working within the culture of the social work subject area at university, for example, in placement policy and procedure.

4. Encourage university and employer partner agencies to further the recognition of practice educators, for example, by upholding the recently published standards for supporting practice educators (British

Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2019) and by engaging with BASW's initiative to raise the profile of practice education's contribution to social work.

My recommendations for further study are:

a. Exploration of the views of people with lived experience on practice educators' stories.

b. Exploration of different views about the on- and off- site models of practice education.

c. Exploration of boundary working from different perspectives (students', managers', practice educators', on-site supervisors' and tutors').

To conclude this chapter and thesis, I express again my gratitude to the practice educators who shared their stories with me. It was my privilege to listen to them, think with them, and hopefully create from them a narrative that is both worthy of them, and beneficial to practice education.

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Appendix 1. Participant Information Sheet

Research title: Gatekeeping stories: a narrative inquiry into practice educators' experiences of assessing social work students in the workplace.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being carried out and what it involves. Please take time to read the following information carefully before deciding. Please contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

The research aims to explore practice educators' experiences.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are a qualified practice educator with experience of assessing social work students in practice.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

What will happen if I decide to take part?

If you agree to take part you will be invited to a conversational style individual interview. The interview will be with me at a mutually convenient location. It is anticipated that the interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be audiotaped. In the interview you will be asked to talk about your experiences of enabling and assessing social work students on placement. The purpose of the interview is to gather insights about such experiences which will become the focus of analysis and interpretation.

If you agree to take part you are free to withdraw at any time during the interview with information you have given to that point being included in the study. At a later date, after the interviews have taken place, you may be invited to a focus group discussion where ongoing analysis and interpretation will be presented. This will provide you with an opportunity to contribute to the interpretation process. However, it is important that you understand that you do not have to attend such a focus group simply because you agreed to be interviewed.

Will my participation in the research be kept confidential?

All personal data (e.g. names) will be kept confidential and processed in accordance with data protection requirements. Transcripts of interviews will be stored on a password protected computer in a locked office. The password will be known only by me. Each transcript will have a number that corresponds to an individual participant. Again, the matching of names to numbers will be known only by me.

Neither you, the organisation you work for, nor the specific geographical area in which you work will be identified in the research as these will both be anonymised. However, it will be known that the study was carried out in the Midlands region of England. Direct anonymised quotes from interviews may be used in research reports and any subsequent publications.

What do I have to do if I want to take part?

If you agree to take part, contact me (my contact details are at the end of this information sheet) and I'll arrange the interview at a mutually convenient time and place. At the start of our meeting I'll go through with you this information sheet and I'll ask you to sign a consent form (a copy of which you can keep) if you remain willing to be interviewed. We would then proceed with the interview.

What are the possible benefits and risks of taking part?

Though there are no direct benefits to you of taking part, by participating you can contribute to the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to practice educators' experiences, the development of practical guidance to practice educators overseeing qualifying social work students in practice, the development of the curriculum for the practice educator course, and to the literature on the assessment of practice.

It is also expected that the findings will inform the education and training of practice educators.

Your confidentiality will be protected by the secure storage and processing of your personal data, your interview and the research data you provide. Your anonymity will be protected by use of codes or pseudonyms to remove your identity from the data, by not identifying your place of work, employer or your specific geographical location. There remains, though, a slight possibility that someone may recognise you from elements of a story you may tell, even after anonymisation.

There are no further risks to you in taking part of the study outside those you would experience in everyday life. Nonetheless, in the unlikely event of you finding the interview upsetting, I will ask you whether you want to continue with the interview and the decision you make will be respected.

What will happen at the end of the research?

The final research report will be available electronically at the end of the study period. It is anticipated that findings from the research will be disseminated through practice educator briefing sessions and workshops within the region, through conferences and peer-reviewed journals, such as the Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning.

Who has reviewed the research?

The research has been approved by the University of Wolverhampton's Faculty of Education, Health and Wellbeing Research Ethics Committee. Nonetheless, if you have any problems with or concern about the research please contact either of my supervisors, Dr Vinette Cross or Dr Paul Wiseman Their contact details are given below.

Contact for further information

If you would like any clarification or further information about this research in order to make a decision as to whether you want to participate, please do not hesitate to contact me. My contact details are:

Ani Murr

Email: [redacted]

Telephone: [redacted] and [redacted]

Address: University of Wolverhampton, Millennium Building, Room MC309, Wulfruna Street, Wolverhampton, WV1 1LY

Alternatively, you may contact one of my supervisors: Dr Vinette Cross: [redacted] or Dr Paul Wiseman: [redacted]

Thank-you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Ani Murr

Appendix 2. Ethical Approval

From: [redacted]
Sent: 08 February 2017 14:18
To: Murr, Ani
Cc: Cross, Vinette (Dr)
Subject: Education Ethics Decision Notification

Approval

Dear Ani,

Thank you for your proposal to the ethics committee. Members of the sub panel have reviewed your work and approval has been given.

If there are any changes in the future, please do make the ethics committee aware of these.

I hope all goes well with the project.

Best Regards,

[redacted]

[redacted]
Assistant Director Pedagogic Partnerships
Head of Postgraduate Taught Provision
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Research Administrator
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[redacted]

Appendix 3. Consent Form

Research title: Gatekeeping stories: a narrative inquiry into practice educators' experiences of assessing social work students in the workplace.

Name of Researcher: Ani Murr

Please initial boxes

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. ☐

3. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

4. I understand that the researcher may wish to publish this study and any results found, for which I give my permission ☐

5. I agree for the interview to be digitally recorded and for the data to be used for the purpose of this study. ☐

6. I agree that quotes from my interview can be used in the report and other relevant publications and understand these will be anonymised. ☐

Name of participant Date Signature

Researcher Date Signature

Appendix 4. Interview-conversation topic guide

Research working title: Gatekeeping stories: a narrative inquiry into practice educators' experiences of social work students in the workplace.

Lead thread

I'm interested to know about how you see the world of practice education. Could we start by talking about that?

Prompts if required

How would you describe what being a practice educator means to you?

I'm interested in hearing about your experiences of being a practice educator.

Tell me a story from your experience that illustrates your work as a practice educator

If I were wanting to know what it's like working with social work students in practice, what would you tell me about?

Can you tell me about your favourite experience of being a practice educator?

Can you tell me about your worst experience of being a practice educator?

Ongoing probes

- Can you tell me what happened?
- Can you tell me a little more about…..?
- What was the experience like for you?
- How did you feel about that..?

Winding down questions

Your stories provide an interesting insight into your experiences. Is there anything you want to add that we haven't already discussed? Does anything strike you as particularly interesting?

Concluding the interview

Thank participant again for her/his time

Appendix 5. Briefing and debriefing participants

Research working title: Gatekeeping stories: a narrative inquiry into practice educators' experiences of social work students in the workplace.

Pre-interview business [not audio recorded]

Thank participant for agreeing to be interviewed

Referring to the Information Sheet, remind participant about the focus of the study, the potential benefits and the nature of their involvement. Seek consent and, if given ensure forms are signed.

Let participant know they can stop the interview if they need to, and may withdraw during the interview if they want to.

Remind participant about the measures taken to protect confidentiality and anonymity.

Inform the participant about the process of the interview - what to expect.

Check participant is happy to proceed with interview and that interview will be recorded.

During the interview (if participant becomes upset/distressed):

Would you like a short break before we continue?

Would you like a drink of water?

Is it alright to continue?

Would you like me to stop the interview?

After the interview [not audio recorded]

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. The interview is now over, though I'd like to reiterate that the information you've given will be treated as confidential and anonymous.

How are you feeling about the experience of being interviewed?

If you have any thoughts about anything we've discussed please contact me.

Appendix 6(i). Extract of transcription – Practice Educator 6 Story 3 (PE6S3)

Are there other stories of how you motivate people, there may not be?

Yeah, with another student I think confidence was her issue and she lacked confidence in what she knew. She was a mature student and had got loads of experience in her previous life, in her previous jobs and she couldn't see the value of how that connected to what she was doing now. I think that helped me motivate her, 'you're good at relationship building. Actually if you can do that in social work, if you can build relationships and get a good stable base, all the other things you can work out, reflect on and change around, the way you do things. So getting that first step you're' … She was good at but she couldn't see the value of that relationship building skill that she had built in her previous practice. So it was a lot of, again, 'why did you do that? How do get to know that person? What do you say? How do you think they feel?' We did a lot of reflecting on emotions and then I moved on to saying 'well actually once you've made the relationship with them and you know how they feel, well actually you can push things a little bit harder'. She had a foster carer who was having issues in the home and house standards had gone down a bit. And she was unconfident and she wouldn't challenge them. She'd got the relationship with them but didn't feel confident to challenge. Which is a big thing. When you first get into practice it's a big thing that doing the hard stuff. It's all very nice doing the nice stuff and building relationships but I was saying 'well actually if you have built up a good relationship, then you talk about being open and honest with them' and that's what we did. I went, she mirrored my practice, she came and I went and gave the bad news and she was able to follow it up then because I gave her the confidence to challenge.

… denotes unfinished sentence

Appendix 6(ii). Transcription of Practice Educator 6 Story 3 (PE6S3) - illustrating story identification

Are there other stories of how you motivate people, there may not be?

Yeah, with another student I think confidence was her issue and she lacked confidence in what she knew [*orientation*]. She was a mature student and had got loads of experience in her previous life, in her previous jobs and she couldn't see the value of how that connected to what she was doing now [*complication*]. I think that helped me motivate her, 'you're good at relationship building. Actually if you can do that in social work, if you can build relationships and get a good stable base, all the other things you can work out, reflect on and change around, the way you do things. So getting that first step you're' … she was good at but she couldn't see the value of that relationship building skill that she had built in her previous practice [*further complication*]. So it was a lot of, again, 'why did you do that? How do get to know that person? What do you say? How do you think they feel?' We did a lot of reflecting on emotions and then I moved on to saying 'well actually once you've made the relationship with them and you know how they feel, well actually you can push things a little bit harder' [*response*]. She had a foster carer who was having issues in the home and house standards had gone down a bit. And she was unconfident and she wouldn't challenge them. She'd got the relationship with them but didn't feel confident to challenge [*ongoing complication*]. Which is a big thing. When you first get into practice it's a big thing that doing the hard stuff. It's all very nice doing the nice stuff and building relationships [argumentation] but I was saying 'well actually if you have built up a good relationship, then you talk about being open and honest with them' and that's what we did. I went, she mirrored my practice, she came and I went and gave the bad news and she was able to follow it up then because I gave her the confidence to challenge [*resolution*].

Appendix 7. Initial story analysis sheet (using Frank's 2010 capacities of stories to do their work). PE6S3: Being that connecting person: enabling learning

Story's Capacity	**First Thoughts**
To deal with or create trouble	Dealing with the troubles students have in their learning and development (i) Difficulty learning … difficulty transferring existing skills (ii) Difficult learning i.e. what they are learning to do is difficult – challenge a foster carer – it's not the nicey-nicey stuff of relationship based practice; that nice sounding knowledge is used in the 'hard stuff' of social work practice
To depict character	PEd – experienced practice educator Committed to social work, passionate, has worked hard to become SWker Values a pragmatic approach of getting on with it; she sees herself as the person who helps students put the jigsaw pieces of social work practice together; she interested in abilities to make connections; she's not teaching the nicey-nicey stuff of the classroom but the hard stuff / the reality of real practice
Point of view	Story is told from the point of view of a practice educator employed in direct practice and acting as an on-site practice educator. Her tone in telling is not antagonistic towards classroom based / university teaching but the tone, language used, and her earlier self-identification as a kinetic learner, offer an interpretation of resistance to privileging of explicit knowledge / academic knowing over 'knowing-in-use' / knowledgeability. The story is not told unsympathetically towards the student. The foster carer gets no space to breathe in this story.
Interpretive openness	The story is not monological. Fiona is not asserting her voice at the expense of others'; the story is not seeking the final word. It opens up interpretation of who practice educators are, they are educators using education theories and methods (andragogy, use of mature learner's previous experience; learning climate of respect and integrity; use of mirroring method of learning in practice ('situated learning' / zone of proximal development discourse community); they are social workers, teaching the 'hard stuff' of social work and the art of "doing delicacy".
Inherent morality	Good practice educators enable students to learn hard not nicey nicey practice. Language use: nice practice is not contrasted with horrid practice but hard practice. The poles are nice – hard. Not nice-horrid; not easy-hard. The contrast is between nicey-nicey practice and the hard stuff of social work. Good practice educators challenge students – high challenge and high support
Resonance	With literature and opinion on what is regarded as difficult social work practice (challenging foster carers, giving bad news) With Angela's story who lacked confidence in their knowledge of child development and so felt unable to challenge parents in their parenting With Belinda's story of the student too timid to ask men personal questions about their 'personal care' (washing) With literature on good practice education; inseparability of enabling and assessing learning in education With talk about the relevance / privileging of classroom based education

Symbiosis	Social work practice and social work education Field and classroom education Fieldwork place and space – symbiotic nature of place and space; place might be the specific placement location (fostering and adoption team, private practice, based in urban area of west midlands) space might be the conceptualization of placement as a learning space for practice; placement time framed around a practice learning agreement, mid-point review and final report writing and punctuated with direct observations 1, 2 and 3; supervision meetings and uni recall days
Shape shifting	Stories takes slight deviation, shape shifts, from a story of enabling a student to learn to a story to become a story about the nature of social work and reverts to the story of the student who learned difficult social work
Performative	The story acts on me – as this practice educator challenged her student so she (gently) challenges me about teaching social work theory like relationship-based social work as a 'good, values-based' theoretical perspective from which to work, without making clear in the classroom that the use that this theory is put to is the hard stuff of social work; forming the relationship is simply the prerequisite to using that relationship to 'push on' and say things service users don't really want to hear
Truth telling	Truths of who practice educators are, what troubles they deal with, the cost to them of their work, the nature of their work (hard), about the need to challenge and support students